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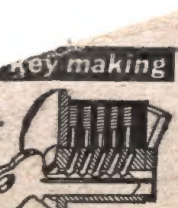

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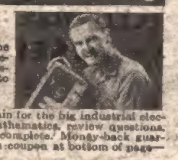

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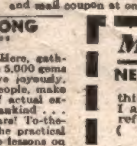

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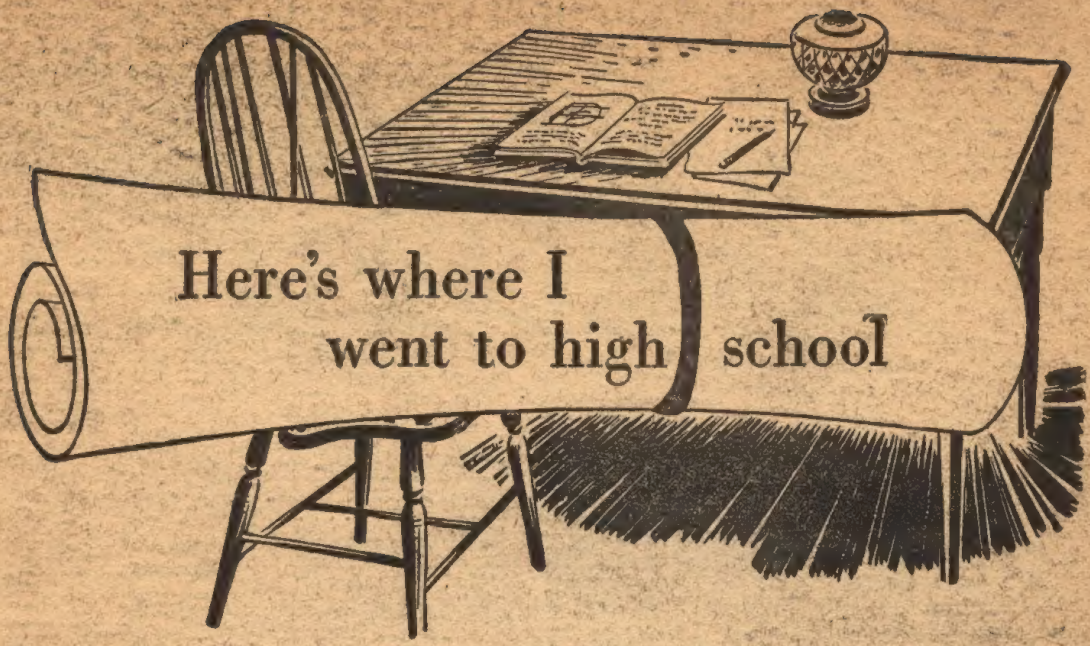

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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THE Bunkhouse

Where nothing but yarns are swapped

Conducted by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

IT'S A SAFE BET that few famous old-timers have been written up as much as Burt Mossman, organizer and first captain of the Arizona Rangers. But because most of it seems to be second-hand stuff I'll tell you about a visit I had with Burt a while back . . .

He is crowding his middle eighties now, and age has got in its licks on him, but Burt's gray eyes still twinkle if you mention the rip-roarious times when he headed the hard-riding Rangers. It isn't second-hand, what he's remembering. Nor is it something read from a history book. Burt lived it. He was part of it. An important part.

"We had a job to do and we did it in the only way there was," Burt said, glancing at the rack which contains 12 guns of various caliber and vintage. "The country was full of crooks of every kind, and it took harsh methods to cope with them."

Harsh is correct. It's a matter of record that few prisoners were taken during those first few hectic weeks after the Arizona Rangers were established at the turn of the century. But a hell-smear of graves were dug, especially in what has been termed "Rustlers' Paradise" along the Mexican Border. That was rough, wild country; a sort of no-man's land of desert and mountain where quick-trigger hombres could do as they pleased. And did, until Mossman's intrepid group moved in on them.

Talk Soft, Shoot Hard

Burt told me he didn't ask questions, just so his men got the job done. They didn't go through a lot of legal hokus-pokus before throwing down on an outlaw. They used their guns, speaking the one language everyone understood. Of course the killing wasn't all on one side; there were Ranger graves to dig also.

You would expect that this legendary figure, who bossed a salty bunch of hell-for-leather Rangers, would be hard-boiled and rough talking himself. In fact Burt has been portrayed that way by writers who took it for granted that he was just another hard-scrabble star-packer who made a big rep by being wild and woolly. Instead Burt Mossman is as gracious in manner and grammatical in speech as a retired army general. His accurate memory and strict regard for exactness in reporting the past are equally impressive.

For instance, Burt recalls that there were 1,700 head of cattle in the herd he trailed from Bloody Basin to Flagstaff over the Mogollon Rim in 1894. He can name most of the men who rode with him on that tough drive where the first water was at the east fork of the Verde.

He remembers also that the big Hashknife outfit, which he ramrodded in 1898, branded upwards of 14,000 calves one year, and that "there was never less than 5,000 head of Hashknife cattle on the north side of the Atlantic & Pacific tracks where we didn't own an acre of range."

There is no paw and beller to Burt Mossman. He tells it the way it was, and leaves the big-windy spouting to those who, lacking his dramatic background, must embroider their tales with untruth. Burt doesn't need to gild the lily. The things he did and the results he accomplished stand out like a windmill in the brush. They don't need exaggerating.

No Sunday School Teachers

Historians have been loud in their praise of Mossman, but contemporary critics were quick to find fault. Some of them insisted that it was useless to tackle so monumental a job with a force of 12 riders. For that's all

(Continued on page 128)

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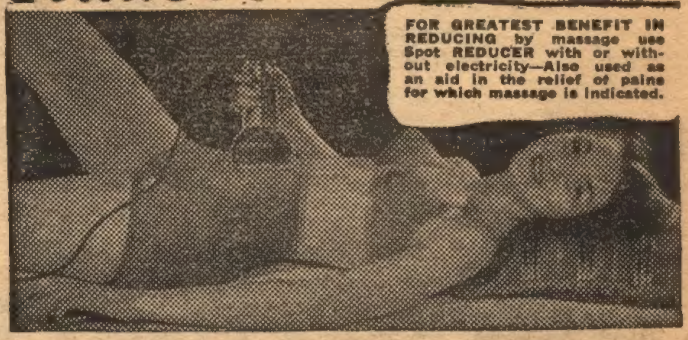

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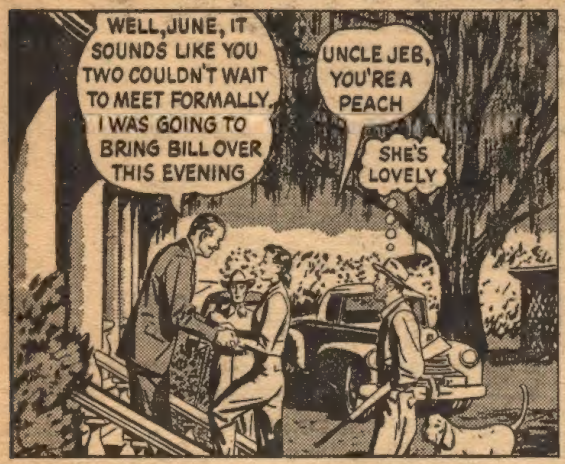
WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!


WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY

WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

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The Background of This Issue's Novel

ARIZONA TERRITORY

ARIZONA Territory was the last stamping-ground of the Western badmen. California desperados were the first to seek a haven in the Territory. Texas became settled, and the outlaws, finding it difficult to operate where people demanded law and order, drifted to Arizona.

The outlaws were followed to Arizona by men who wore law badges. Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and Bat Masterson came from Dodge City, Kansas, to become lawmen in Tombstone. John Slaughter came from Texas, to found a great ranch and to become a sheriff. Dee Harkey also came from Texas, as did the famous Jeff Milton.

When silver was discovered in the heart of the Apache country of Arizona, Tombstone was founded, and became a boomtown of fifteen thousand population. Smaller mining towns came into being. Each town had its quota of outlaws and plain, ornery gunmen.

Tucson was headquarters of the nefarious Indian Ring—white men who, for their own profit, stirred up trouble between the Apaches and the Army. Mexican *contrabandistos* smuggled Mexican gold to Tucson, selling it for American dollars. Goods were also smuggled across the Border, to avoid paying Customs duty. With the advent of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, men wholly lacking in scruples took to smuggling Chinese, Japanese and Hindus into the United States across the Arizona and California lines. Hundreds of these aliens never reached the Promised Land. Many were killed by the smugglers, others were left to die in the desert.

Most of the smuggling was across the line in the hot desert country west of Tucson. Here the Santa Cruz River lost itself in the thirsty sand, and to the northwest the Gila ran thinly through a scorched world. To the south was *El Camino Diablo*, the devil's own road, from Mexico to California.

In Texas the Rio Grande formed a natural barrier between the United States and Mexico, but in Arizona the Border was only an imaginary line. Even today only partially fenced. The desert lies on both sides of the boundary, and today, as in Jeff Milton's time, alien smugglers are busy crossing it.

The Apaches no longer raid in Arizona, and Mexican bandits no longer venture across the Line. But men still live in the desert who can remember when every man had to carry his own law with him—in his holster.

"You will talk," Mireles said harshly, "and tell the truth!"

The Rio Kid rode into Mexico to seek a missing man—and landed smack in the middle of a vast and vicious alien-smuggling ring!

SMUGGLERS' MOON

A NOVEL BY JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER I

The Abandoned Men

THE moon was huge, blood-red. Beneath it, the desert lay silent and still and as mysterious as some lifeless planet seen by man only in imagination. Weird patterns of pale moonlight and deep shadows accentuated the grotesqueness of sand dunes, eroded rocks, serpentine gullies, and cactus growths. It was a forbidding place, a frightening land.

Yet two horsemen made their way across it, traveling by night on some urgent mission. They rode in silence, and only the sharp *clop-clopping* of their horses' hoofs struck against the desert quiet. One rode slightly behind the other, leading a spare horse under pack. His mount was a handsome black gelding, and he sat it with all the unconscious ease and grace of a *vaquero*. He was, in fact, garbed in the handsome, rather gaudy old-style of the Mexican *caballero*.

The other man rode a dun horse, a sturdy animal unhandsome in appearance and downright ugly of temper, except with his rider. This rider was no less expert a horseman than his companion, but he sat a mount differently.

Military training kept him stiffly erect in his saddle—typically the cavalryman—and he still wore the uniform of a captain in the United States Cavalry.

To those who knew these two men—and they were widely known—it would not have seemed strange that they should be traveling this *jornado del muerto*. There were few parts of the West that Captain Robert Pryor, lately of the Union Army and now famous as the Rio Kid, and his *companero*, Celestino Mireles, had not traveled. Riders of the danger trails, for them the desert—the journey of death, as the Mexicans called it—had no terrors.

But the scream that knifed through the night startled even them.

Bob Pryor's war horse, the wild-tempered Saber that had gone through battle with him, snorted with alarm and reared high. Mireles murmured, *"Por Dios!"* and jerked his black to a halt.

The scream came again, an inhuman cry that was not so much one of terror as of unbearable torment. It was uttered by a human voice—the Rio Kid was convinced of that. He brought his mount under control, listened tensely. The scream did not come again but they heard less piercing shrieks and a strange jumble of mutterings, moanings, and sing-song chatterings. As an accompaniment to this sub-human sound, there came a metallic clanging and clattering. All in all, it was a cacaphony of tormented souls in rhythm to a demon's music.

The two riders peered one way and another, seeing nothing.

They looked at each other, puzzled and uneasy.

The weird medley of sound grew louder, and suddenly Mireles stared at something beyond his saddle companion. A look of alarm came to the young Mexican's face.

"General!" he gasped. "Look!" He lifted a pointing finger.

TO Celestino Mireles, who had good reason to know the mettle of his companion, Bob Pryor was the greatest of soldiers. He never addressed him otherwise than as "General." Catching the urgency in Mireles' voice, Pryor twisted in his saddle and stared in the direction indicated by his companion's pointing finger. A look of disbelief spread over his bronzed face. He could not believe his own eyes.

The creature responsible for the uproar they had heard had appeared atop a high sand dune, silhouetted against the huge red moon. Seven of them, in single file, moving clumsily—staggering, reeling, stumbling—but all in step. They kept up their mournful wailing, and the metallic clatter racketed in eerie tempo.

Mireles found voice again. *"Los espectros! Ghosts!"*

The Rio Kid almost thought that himself, then he exclaimed:

"No, they're Chinese! Wait here, *amigo!*"

He swung Saber about, rode slowly toward the dune. The seven shadowy figures seemed unaware of them. The last in line crumpled to the sand, but the others, not even hesitating, dragged him along. They were bound together. They wore leg-irons, and a heavy chain linked one with the other. The chain accounted for the metallic clatter. Putting Saber up the dune, the Rio Kid called:

"Here! This way!"

They stopped as one, faces turned toward him. There was light enough for him to see their suffering. They were crazed by thirst and fear. How they came to be there in the middle of nowhere, the Rio Kid could not guess. But he knew that unless he could help them, they would soon die—horribly. He reined in, dismounted midway up the sloping sand bank.

Saber was nervous, snorting with uneasiness. The dun did not like the smell of these people. It was not a familiar

smell. But they were silent now, dumb, mute, staring stupidly at man and animal. They were little men, shoddily dressed, each wearing a pigtail.

Pryor said, "Come down here! We'll give you water."

One spoke—jibberish, to the Rio Kid's ears—and then, uttering a wild yell, led

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR

the others down the dune. They were madmen, and Bob Pryor realized his danger just in time. As they drew near, he braced himself and struck out at the closest face. The hit man fell sprawling, dragged another down with him. Hands beat at him, clawed at him.

Then the dun war steed trumpeted and lunged against the frantic Chinese, bowling them over. The horse would have maimed, perhaps killed, some of them, but the Rio Kid caught hold of the reins and said sharply, "Steady, boy!"

He wheeled Saber away from the pitiful-looking wretches, and they were now as subdued as they had been berserk a moment before. They remained sitting or lying on the ground, none trying to rise. Celestino Mireles came rushing forward, a gun in his hand. The Rio Kid turned to him.

"It's all right, *amigo*." He took one of the canteens off the pack-horse, removed the stopper. The eyes of the Chinese stared at the canteen greedily. One man reached out his hands as a beggar would.

The Rio Kid promptly answered that mute plea, but he rationed the water, permitting each man to drink only a little, so that he would not be sickened. After a few minutes, he passed the canteen around a second time. The Chinese were abjectly grateful. Their thirst slaked and their fear eased, they recovered from their madness.

The Rio Kid and his *compadre* made camp in a hollow in the dunes, built a brush fire, made coffee and a hasty meal of beans and bacon. The Rio Kid motioned for the Chinese to come to the fire and get the food. They came hesitantly, timidly, their chains clanking.

The young Mexican hunkered down on the opposite side of the fire, smoked a brown-paper cigarette, and eyed them wonderingly.

"Who are they, General?" he asked. "What do they here, in chains?"

The Rio Kid had been wondering about that himself. He could only guess the answer, since there was no way of communicating by words with the seven men in irons.

"I think they were smuggled across the Border into the Arizona Territory from Mexico," he told Celestino. "For some reason, the smugglers have abandoned them. Maybe some lawmen were on the trail of those devils in human form."

"Smugglers, General? They smuggle these people?"

"Yes. There ars laws that say Chinese may not enter our country."

"Ah? But they are here. What, now, will we do with them?"

"I don't know. We can't ride on and leave them here. They'll die."

"But it is important, General *mio*, that we go on to Valido?"

PRYOR nodded. He had not forgotten that they were in a hurry, that they were desperately needed at the mining town of Valido. A wartime friend of Captain Bob Pryor's, a Colonel Avery, had summoned him. Avery's son, a mining engineer employed in Mexico, had been kidnaped by Sonoran bandits. A ransom had been demanded and paid, but young Steve Avery had not been released. Colonel Phil Avery knew of the reputation Bob Pryor, as the Rio Kid, had earned as a man who could always be depended upon to help those in trouble, for the Rio Kid was famous for combatting evil.

The career of the Rio Kid—more of a crusade—had been launched when young Captain Robert Pryor had returned home to Texas at the close of the War, to find that his parents had been slaughtered by Border jumpers and his home burned. He had set out to avenge his parents' death, and it had led to his fight for vengeance on a wider scope. Among the first things that had happened while he had followed the trail of the killers, had been his rescue of Celestino Mireles from certain death at the hands of bandits. The young Mexican's home had been attacked, and his parents also slaughtered.

Since then the two had been inseparable *compadres* on the danger trails. After that first gunsmoke meeting, Celestino had followed wherever his companion led. Pryor had been too restless, too, after four years of soldiering, to settle down. So instead of taking up some gainful pursuit that would have profited only himself, he and Celestino Mireles had embarked upon a career of helping those who found themselves the victims of persecution.

Having served under special orders of such generals as Grant, Sheridan, and the reckless Custer during the bloody conflict between the States, Pryor was well suited for such crusading.

Though no longer holding a commission with the Army and never wearing a badge, he was now the foremost champion—with Mireles at his side—of law and order in the West. Decent men called him friend. Lawless men hated him. And feared him. He was no glory-seeking gunman, but he was skillful enough with his Colts to challenge the worst of the gunfighters. He was easy-going of appearance—blue of eyes, a devil-may-care glint in them, handsome of features, a brash smile on his lips. But he possessed a will of iron, and he was deadly when only force would serve to wreck the power of unscrupulous men.

His surprise at finding the Chinese abandoned in the middle of the desert was not so great as that of Mireles, for he knew that men's evil takes many forms and that alien-running was a profitable if vicious traffic. Too, Arizona was the last stamping-ground of the West's badmen. Law enforcement was slow in coming to the Territory, where the lawless element far outnumbered the few peace officers. Nor was he greatly surprised that a mining engineer should be captured and held for ransom by bandits.

Both sides of the Border had need of the Rio Kid's special talents. But his immediate problem was to get the Chinese to safety without losing time, even before learning the details of Steve Avery's kidnapping.

Celestine suddenly said tautly, *"Hola!* I hear something, General!"

The Mexican tossed his cigarette into the fire, rose tall and alert, drawing the revolver that he carried as one of a pair and with a wicked-bladed knife in his brilliant red sash. He cut a fine figure in his high-peaked sombrero, braided *chatequa*, laced *calzoneras*, and boots of embossed leather. His visage was hawk-

like, the features bold and hinting of patrician blood. His eyes were dark and flashing, his hair black. His manner was bold, his bearing proud. He stepped away from the flickering glow of the fire, into the shadows.

"A rider comes, General," he called softly. "A rider with a pack-horse."

"Headed this way?"

"*Si.* He holds his hand up to show he is friendly."

"Tell him to name himself."

Mireles called, "*Quien es?* Who are you, hombre?"

The reply came immediately, in a brash and good-natured voice: "Don't get trigger-nervous, friend. This here's the Law—Jeff Milton, himself!"

CHAPTER II

The Law in Arizona

BOB PRYOR felt a measure of relief as he watched Milton ride in from the desert shadows. If there was any man who typified the true Westerner, it was this Jeff Davis Milton. He not only looked, but acted the part, and there were men who claimed that he was the best man with a six-shooter in all the Southwest. He had been a cowpuncher, a Texas Ranger, a sheriff, a Wells Fargo shotgun messenger, an oil wildcatter. He had been most everything a man could be without stepping over onto the wrong side of the law. In a word, he was the Rio Kid's kind of man.

His arrival was opportune. It meant that Bob Pryor and Mireles could turn the Chinese over to him, and then go about their own business.

Milton reined in near the campfire, dismounted. His shaggy mustache was turning gray, but his black eyes were as sharp and as youthful as in his heyday. He showed no surprise at sight of the Chinese. He shook hands with the Rio Kid and Mireles, saying:

"I heard that you hombres were in Tucson, and was hoping I'd get to see you. Didn't expect we'd meet here in the middle of the *malpais*, though."

"We're on our way to Valido," Pryor told him. "But we've been held up by these poor souls. Any chance of your taking them off our hands, Jeff?"

"Yeah. I've been looking for them."

"You knew about them?"

Milton nodded. "Maybe you didn't hear about my new job," he said, grinning. "Got it by appointment of the President himself. Yes, sir. I'm line rider for the Immigration Service. My official title is Mounted Chinese Inspector. A loco job, I'm telling you. And the toughest one I've ever tackled. My bailiwick is the Border all the way across Arizona and California." He glanced at the Chinese again. "Yeah, I knew about them. Leg irons and chains, eh? Well, that's Armand's work."

"Armand?" the Rio Kid asked, curious.

"Jake Armand, one of the big smugglers," Milton told him. "He's the only alien-runner that shackles the Chinese together when he brings them across the Border. I got a tip that he was running a bunch across last night, and I tried to catch him at it. But he outsmarted me, somehow. When I didn't catch him, I cut for sign and picked up the tracks of these China boys. Been following them since mid-afternoon. Armand must have been tipped off that I was in this part of the country looking for him, so he turned them loose to shift for themselves." He cursed the smuggler under his breath, anger replacing the good nature in his face.

"I tell you, Captain," he went on, "cattle rustling, horse stealing and bank robbing are polite parlor games compared to Chinese smuggling. Most so-called badmen wouldn't have any part of trafficking in human lives. Only vultures in the shape of men go in for it. The things I've seen—"

He shook his head, dismayed at his own thoughts.

There was still coffee in the pot on the fire, and Milton helped himself to a cup. As he sipped the coffee, he told Pryor and Mireles how vast was the illicit business of bringing Chinese into the country by way of Mexico. The Chinese came by the boat-loads, were landed at a Mexican port, brought to some hide-out near the Arizona or California line, and then, in small groups, were smuggled across in the dark of night.

The smugglers—greedy, heartless men like Jake Armand—received their pay in advance. Two hundred dollars for each Chinese. If they got the Chinese safely across, well and good. The aliens were turned over to the people who did the paying. If the Law turned up, meaning Jeff Milton, the smugglers thought only of their own hides. They would either abandon or kill the Chinese in their care. Milton told of finding sixteen murdered Chinese in the bottom of a dry well.

"Lives are worth nothing to men like Armand," the inspector said bitterly. "They play a dirty, bloody game."

"Who pays them, Jeff?"

"An organization called the Six Companies. It's an outfit to which all Chinese in America belong, and has its headquarters in San Francisco. I know what you're thinking—that the people paying for the smuggling should be rounded up. I wish it were that easy. It's not. The law can't prove anything on a tricky Oriental set-up like the Six Companies. The Chinese mind is too cunning for us to deal with. No, the best the Immigration Service can do is to try to catch the smugglers and send them to prison."

MILTON finished his coffee. "We're making a little headway," he said, after a moment, smiling ruefully. "At least, I've reason to think so. I've become a marked man. They try to get to me in all sorts of ways. I've been offered a vacation in Mexico and a big ranch in California. I've been shot at from ambush, and I've nearly been knifed. I've been warned that I'll be poisoned. Like I said, it's a loco job—and I'm earning my seven dollars a day."

"What will you do with these seven men?" Pryor asked.

"Take them to Tucson. They'll be deported eventually, sent back to China."

"And Jake Armand collected fourteen hundred dollars for them?"

"That's right. And his only expense was the leg-irons and chains."

"I'd like to meet up with Mr. Armand."

"*Si,*" Celestino Mireles broke in. "So would I."

Jeff Miilton eyed them both while filling and lighting his pipe. "I can't hire you as my deputies," he said. "I haven't the authority. But if you'd like to lend a hand— Well, I've an idea the three of us could outsmart Jake Armand, sure."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "Sorry, Jeff," he said. "We can't just now. We've got another iron in the fire, one that is apt to keep us plenty busy for a time."

"Reckon I can guess what it is," Milton said, puffing on his pipe. "You're on your way to Valido to see Colonel Avery. Am I right?"

"You're right. You know about the kidnaping of Avery's son?"

"Yeah," Milton said. "The Colonel is keeping it quiet, like the ransom note warned him to. But he told me about it, thinking maybe I could help. You see, Pryor, young Steven Avery was one of the people sending me tips about the smugglers. Working down in Mexico, he was in a position to learn quite a bit about them. His father has an idea that it may be the smugglers who kidnaped Steve."

"What do you think, Jeff?"

"I figure some smuggler may have killed Steve Avery for informing on them, but I can't see them going in for kidnaping and collecting ransom money. More likely a bunch of *bandidos* who have him."

"Well," the Rio Kid said, "Celestine and I will find out. We don't know any-

thing about smugglers, but we've been up against bandits plenty." He glanced at the young Mexican. "We'll break camp and be on our way, *amigo*. . . ."

It was at dusk the following evening that the Rio Kid and his *compadre* reached the mining town of Valido which was located a scant five miles from the Mexican border. It was like most Southwest towns, some of its buildings and houses being built of adobe, and some of unpainted plank, an American town with a strong Mexican flavor. The two travelers stabled their horses at the livery barn called the Peso Corral.

"I'll go see Colonel Avery, *amigo*," the Rio Kid told Mireles, "and you have a look around town."

Mireles nodded. "*Si*. I will talk to my own people. If there is anything to know, they will know it—and speak only to their own kind."

Colonel Avery was in the mining supply busienss, and Bob Pryor located his warehouse and office at the east end of Valido. There was a light in the office, and upon entering the small shacklike office he found a young woman with his old friend. Avery rose hastily, offering his hand, and his pleasure at seeing Bob Pryor again was genuine.

"It's been a long time, Captain," he said. "I think it must be seven—eight years since we last met."

It was all of that, Pryor knew. He found Colonel Avery changed, much older. He was a tall, gaunt man with white hair, mustache and goatee. He had reached that stage of life, the winter of life, where a man's faculties slowed up and left him indecisive and incapable of direct, effective action.

The girl across the room rose from her chair. She was a tall, auburn-haired girl in a fashionable green dress. She was perhaps twenty, and definitely she did not belong in such a town as Valido. She seemed to come from a more sedate background. Her lovely eyes reflected the same sort of worry that Pryor saw

"They're Chinese," exclaimed the Rio Kid

in Colonel Avery's faded ones. Avery introduced her as Katherine Eberts, his son's fiancée.

"Katherine came down from Denver to marry Steve, Captain," he explained. "The wedding date was set for a week ago. Steve was captured on his way here from the mine where he was working." To the girl, the colonel said, "My dear, if any man can rescue Steve, it's Captain Pryor—the Rio Kid."

PRYOR said, directly to Katherine, "I'll do my best. You must believe that. I may be able to accomplish more than if you applied to the Law. Now if you'll give me the details—" He divided a questioning look between them.

Colonel Avery said dully, "I received a note from the kidnapers on the day I expected my son to arrive here. It told me that I would see him again only if I paid a ransom of ten thousand dollars. I was to place the money in a shack at the abandoned Shamrock Mine about seven miles southwest of here, at midnight of the night following my receipt of the note. I followed the instructions. But ten days have passed, and still I've received no word from Steve."

"The ransom money was taken from the shack?"

"Yes. Matt Kerrigan and I went out three days later to make sure."

"Kerrigan?"

"A friend," said Avery. "He owns the Valido Freighting Company."

"Could I see the note?" Pryor asked.

"I haven't got the first one," Colonel Avery said, turning to his desk. "The instructions said that I was to destroy it at once. I did. It also warned me not to go to the Law. But I received a second note. Here it is."

He handed over a scrap of brown wrapping paper. The message upon it was in pencil, in a crude handwriting. It read:

Senor—$10,000 is not enough ransom for so important a man as your son. You must pay $10,000 more, at the same place, at the same time, the second night from when you find this message, and your son will surely be returned to you.

The Rio Kid looked up, an angry glint in his blue eyes. "So that's their game," he said flatly. "They want more ransom."

"And I haven't another ten thousand dollars, Captain."

"When did you receive this note?"

"It was pushed under the door here when I opened the office Friday morning."

"Friday morning, eh? Then last night was when you should have left the second ten thousand at the pay-off spot?"

Colonel Avery nodded heavily. "I left all the cash I had—two thousand dollars," he said. "I left a note with the money, asking more time to raise the other eight thousand. So far I haven't been able to raise that much. Nor have I heard anything further from the kidnappers."

Pryor was thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Tell me how to find this abandoned Shamrock Mine, Colonel. I'll ride out there and have a look around. It's as good a place as any for me to start. The only starting-place, in fact."

As Avery finished giving him directions to the mine, the office door opened and a man entered. He was as tall as Bob Pryor, and of stockier build, a trace of gray at his temples showing him to be at least close to forty years of age. He had the well-barbered, well-tailored look of a prosperous townsman. Pryor guessed him to be Colonel Avery's friend and the owner of the freighting company, and found, when Avery introduced them, that it was an accurate guess. He was Matt Kerrigan.

Kerrigan smiled pleasantly as he shook hands, but said, a bit anxiously, "I'm surprised that Colonel Avery called in the Army. That is the one thing which will jeopardize Steve's safety—if he is still alive."

Pryor said, "I'm no longer Army, Mr. Kerrigan."

Kerrigan eyed him questioningly. "But the uniform— Oh, sure, I understand! You're the famous Rio Kid." He appeared enthusiastic. "Of course! The

Colonel said that he was sending you a letter. Do you think that you can do anything about this outrageous business, Captain?"

"I can try."

"It's a ticklish business, with a man's life at stake."

"Please!" Katherine Eberts broke in. "Please, don't keep saying that—that Steve may be killed! I want to cling to the hope that—" She couldn't say more. Her lips quivered, and tears filled her eyes.

KERRIGAN went to her, put his arm about her shoulders, tried to comfort her. It was a casual, friendly gesture. But Pryor noticed how the girl became rigid under the man's touch; she actually shrank away from Kerrigan. The man chose not to notice her resentment of his familiarity.

Smiling at her, he said, "I'm clinging to the same hope, my dear. In fact, I'm determined to make it more than a mere hope."

He took a well-stuffed wallet from his inside coat pocket, handed it to the old gentleman. "Here is the remaining eight thousand dollars you need, sir," he said —a bit dramatically, it seemed to the Rio Kid. "Part I had in bank, part I had to borrow. If it will buy Steve's release, I'm glad to loan it to you."

The Rio Kid saw that Kerrigan glanced at Katherine, as though wanting an expression of her gratitude more than Colonel Avery's. Evidently, Matt Kerrigan was something of a ladies' man. Still, he could hardly be blamed for finding Katherine Eberts attractive. She was infinitely desirable.

Kerrigan said, "I'd suggest, sir, that you hold the money until the bandits reply to your note. You'll probably hear from them in a day or two." He took out a cigar, lighted it, then turned to Bob Pryor. "I'd like to have a talk with you, Captain. I may be able to tell you about the bandit situation so that you'll know what steps to take in effecting young Avery's release if this second payment fails. I'm familiar with conditions on both sides of the Border. My freight wagons do a great deal of hauling to the mines down in Sonora—bandit country."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I'm at your service," he said.

Kerrigan turned to Colonel Avery and Katherine. "You'd both better go home and get some rest," he advised. "Just leave everything to Captain Pryor and me."

Avery said thickly, "Matt, I don't know what to say—"

"There's no need to say anything, sir," Kerrigan replied. He bowed to Katherine, turned to the door.

Pryor said, "I'll see you later, Colonel. You, too, Miss Eberts."

He followed Kerrigan from the office, and the man suggested that they go to a saloon and have a drink while they talked.

CHAPTER III

Shot From the Dark

THE RIO KID and Kerrigan headed toward midtown, passing a wagon yard and its offices and barn. The office was another small plank building, dark now. The sign over the door read:

VALIDA FREIGHTING COMPANY

Kerrigan said, with a measure of pride, "My place."

Only the Rio Kid sensed the danger imminent at that moment. Perhaps his faculties were more alert than Kerrigan's. At any rate, the freighter did not see the shadowy figure moving furtively among the wagons in the yard—and the glint of a gun-barrel.

The Rio Kid exclaimed, "Watch it!" and gave Kerrigan a violent shove that sent him reeling out of harm's way, just as the gun blazed. The Rio Kid grabbed

out his right-hand revolver and whirled toward the wagon yard.

The gun crashed again.

This time the spurt of powder-flame was aimed at the Rio Kid!

The shriek of the slug was so close that he knew his only recourse was to open fire. Another shot might target him or Kerrigan. The ambusher was determined to kill. As he squeezed out his shot, the Rio Kid heard a panicky cry and saw the gunman stagger. Another shot did blaze there among the big freight rigs, but it was unaimed and went harmlessly into the ground. The shadowy figure crumpled to the ground, lay sprawled.

Kerrigan had recovered from being thrown off balance by the shove, and had drawn a short-barreled revolver from a shoulder holster beneath his coat. Moving close, he said shakily, "You've saved my life, Captain!"

"Who is he, Kerrigan?"

"I—I don't know."

"You must know who would want to kill you!"

Kerrigan shook his head, looking puzzled. They moved into the yard, found the gunman lying dead beside the high rear wheel of one of the wagons. Pryor struck a match, and in its flickering glow they saw that the dead man was a tough-visaged sort who had been a rider. He wore a weather-beaten Stetson, and there were spurs on his boots. He was small of stature, wiry of build; his stringy hair was rust-red.

Kerrigan said, startled, "Red Nixon!"

"Who's Red Nixon?" Pryor demanded. "What was he?"

"A border tough," Kerrigan replied, looking a bit sick. "A hardcase. He was one of Jake Armand's men."

"Armand, the smuggler?"

"Yes."

"Why did he want to kill you?"

Kerrigan had opened his mouth to explain, when he said quickly, "I'll tell you later." People were running toward them from the center of town, excitedly shouting, wanting to know what had happened. One of the first to arrive was a lanky old-timer with a gray handle-bar mustache. He wore a town marshal's badge.

He peered at Kerrigan, and asked, "What's going on here, Mr. Kerrigan?" There was a great deal of respect for Matt Kerrigan in his voice.

"I was walking by here with Captain Pryor," Kerrigan told him, "when Nixon opened fire without warning." He introduced the marshal to Captain Pryor as Mel Archer. "The captain was quick-witted," he added. "He saved my life, without a doubt."

"Red Nixon, eh?" Archer muttered. "Well, he was a bad actor. He must have been drunk, drunk enough to have figured he could get away with killing and robbery. No other reason but robbery that he'd have for trying to shoot you, is there, Mr. Kerrigan?"

"Well—I don't know."

"That'd have to be it," Archer went on hurriedly. Obviously, he was too old a man to handle the job he held efficiently. "There'll be no fuss about his being killed. In fact, this town owes Captain Pryor a vote of thanks. I'll take care of the body."

The crowd was swelling, morbidly curious, talking excitedly. Matt Kerrigan said, "Then you won't need us here, Marshal?"

Archer replied in that carefully respectful tone for Kerrigan that there was no need for the freighter or Pryor to stay around. Kerrigan touched his companion's arm, suggested that they get away from the mob. The Rio Kid turned away with him, reluctantly. To take a human life, even the life of a man who would kill from ambush, always shook him.

He could not shrug Nixon's death off as easily as could Kerrigan and Mel Archer. But he knew these border towns. In a place like Valido, where badmen made up too large a part of the population, there was seldom any real investigation made into a violent death. It would always be so until law and order

won the upperhand, and the situation as it was at present had to be accepted.

The saloon they entered was small and quiet. Kerrigan led the way to a table at the rear of the room, and the bartender who brought them their drinks treated the freighting firm owner with the same sort of deference that had been shown him by the marshal. The Rio

CELESTINO MIRELES.

Kid was getting the impression that Matt Kerrigan was something of a power in Valido.

The freighter said, "Here's looking at you, Captain," and downed his drink hurriedly. He seemed to need it. He was badly shaken by his narrow escape, if not by the killing of the gunman. He had lost his cigar during the shooting, and lighted another.

"I owe you an explanation," he said when he was somewhat calmer. "I didn't give Mel Archer an explanation for Nixon's trying to kill me for two reasons. One is that Archer is too old to cope with an involved situation, as you must have noticed. The other is that I've got to be careful. As I told you, Nixon is one of Jake Armand's men. Armand smuggles Chinese across the Border from Mexico. He's involved in one of the most inhuman of all the dirty games being played in Arizona Territory today."

The Rio Kid nodded complete agreement to that. "Go on," he urged.

"Well, I have come by information about the smuggling from my teamsters who haul machinery and supplies to the mines down in Sonora," Kerrigan continued. "I pass this information on to the Immigration Service. The smugglers have discovered what I'm doing. They sent me a warning some weeks ago that I was a marked man. I— Well, I didn't take the warning seriously until tonight."

"So Jake Armand sent Nixon to kill you?"

"I'm convinced of it."

"I wouldn't want to be in your boots, Kerrigan," Bob Pryor said. "There may be another attempt on your life by another of Armand's men."

Kerrigan nodded gravely. "I'll have to be careful," he said. "Now about the kidnaping of Steve Avery—" He paused, studied the burning end of his cigar. "Captain, I'm of the opinion that Steve is already dead."

"What makes you believe it?"

"The second ransom note."

"You believe Steve would have been released upon payment of the first ransom money if he was still alive?"

"Yes. Those Mexican bandits aren't usually so greedy," Kerrigan said. "Young Avery isn't the first American they've captured and held for ransom. But to my knowledge he is the first one who hasn't been released upon payment of ransom."

"He couldn't have been seized by the smugglers?"

"Smugglers turned kidnapers?"

"It could be."

"Perhaps," Kerrigan said thoughtfully. "But I doubt it. Kidnaping for ransom is *bandido* business. Bandits are bolder than smugglers. At the same time they're less crafty. There's much the difference between the two that there is between a safecracker and a pickpocket.

No, I can't see Jake Armand kidnaping an important man like Steve Avery. Nor any of the other big smugglers. They would be too afraid of the Mexican *Rurales*. On the other hand, the *bandidos* are strong enough to fight the *Rurales* on occasion."

"Who are the other smugglers?"

"There are two other big operators like Armand," Kerrigan said. "Chris Harmon and Juan Sanchez. The three of them run more Chinese across the Border than all the other smugglers put together. Their headquarters is a small village in the Sonoroan mountains—Aquila Plaza." A surprised look showed on his face. "Why, come to think of it," he exclaimed, "the mine where Steve Avery was employed, the Celestial Mine, is not far from Aquila Plaza!"

"Celestial?" the Rio Kid said. "Doesn't that indicate Chinese?"

"Yes. And the mine is owned by some rich Chinese who live in San Francisco."

"It looks as though I'd better make a trip across the Border."

"I have some wagons going to the Celestial Mine," Kerrigan said. "They're hauling mining machinery and tools from Colonel Avery's warehouse. I could arrange for you to travel with the outfit."

"Thanks for the offer," the Rio Kid said, rising. He saw Celestino Mireles in the doorway. "I'll think it over. When is the outfit leaving Valido?"

"At sunup."

The Rio Kid nodded, offered his hand. "I'll look you up if I decide to make the trip with your wagons," he said. "Thanks for the drink, sir—and the information."

He went to join his *compadre*.

MIRELES said, as they walked away from the saloon, "I came because I heard that there was a shooting, General. And that a man in uniform was in the gunfight. It was you who killed that hombre, General?"

Pryor nodded, explained what had happened, and said, "News travels fast in this town, *amigo*."

Mireles's teeth flashed as he smiled. "My people see all, hear all," he said. "I was in a *cantina*, and a man came running in to tell about the fight. Everyone was excited because this Senor Kerrigan was the man the ambusher tried to kill. The Mexicans do not like Senor Kerrigan, General."

"They don't?"

"It seems that he is a big man in Valido," Mireles continued. "A man with much influence. But he is also a great gambler. And a poor loser. There was a poker game one night. Senor Kerrigan lost two hundred dollars to a Mexican storekeeper. He became angry and gave the storekeeper a beating. That is one of the reasons why the Mexican people do not like Senor Kerrigan. There are others. But I have learned something about Steve Avery."

"Good. What is it, Celestino?"

"My people learn things in a mysterious fashion. What you call the grapevine, you know. They know what is going on both on this side of the Border and on the other. They say that young Senor Avery is alive."

"You think it's true?"

"I would gamble on it, General."

Pryor nodded. "What else do your people say, *amigo?*"

Mireles frowned. "They say that not even the *Rurales* can rescue Senor Avery," he said gravely. "Because he is a captive of a big band of outlaws in the mountains around Aquila Plaza. The leader of the *bandidos*, General, is called *El Bribon*—The Rogue."

They halted before the Valido House, and the Rio Kid said that they would take a room there for the night. He added, "In the morning we'll start for Mexico."

He saw Mireles's eyes light up. American citizen though he was, the young *caballero* was always eager to visit the land of his fathers. Pryor took some money from his pocket, handed it to Mireles. "I can't wear my uniform south of the Border," he said. "So I'll go rigged

as a cowhand. I don't want to be seen buying the duds, for *El Bribon* may have spies here in Valido who'll be keeping an eye on the Rio Kid. So you do my shopping for me."

Mireles was amused. "The General becoming a cowhand again! That is something!"

Pryor laughed, turned into the hotel. It would not be the first time he shed his blue uniform for less conspicuous attire. He had acted as a spy on several occasions during the war, once posing as a tinware peddler, and another time as a Virginia farmer.

He registered for a room, took his key, went upstairs. He was lighting the lamp in the room when a timid knock sounded. Moving to the door, he asked, "Who is it?" His hand was on the grip of his Colt.

"It's Katherine Eberts, Captain. I must talk with you."

Surprised, he quickly opened the door for her.

CHAPTER IV

A Woman in the Wagon!

KATHERINE was breathless from hurrying, embarrassed at having come to a man's hotel room. But the Rio Kid could see a desperation about her, and he knew that only her anxiety for her fiancé's safety had brought her.

He drew her into the room, closed the door. She was wearing a *rebozo*, one of those gaily colored scarves that Mexican women fancied. She must have donned it to conceal her features against curious eyes, for now she dropped it from about her head to her shoulders. She looked at him pleadingly.

"Please don't think I'm in the habit of doing such a thing as this, Captain," she said huskily. "But I did want to—well, see you alone."

"I understand, of course," he said. "What did you want to see me about?"

"You'll go to Mexico to rescue Steve, won't you?"

"Yes. I'm starting in the morning."

"Well—I want to go with you."

He gave a start. "But why?" he asked, puzzled as well as astonished.

Katherine smiled faintly. "I know what you're thinking," she told him. "That it would be dangerous for me, and that I would be a burden to you. But I'm not afraid, and I won't let myself be a burden. I feel that if I could see those bandits myself, could appeal to their leader and make him realize how much Steve means to me— Oh, they couldn't refuse to release him alive and unharmed if a woman asked it!"

"You're afraid they may harm him even after the second ransom is paid?"

"Yes. I can't believe he is already dead, so—"

"I'm sure he is alive, Miss Eberts," the Rio Kid said gently. "I've reason to believe it." He told her what his partner had learned from the Mexicans of Valido, and that brought real hope to her eyes. "How long Steve will be safe, I don't know," he added. "I wouldn't hazard a guess. But to take you along—" He shook his head. "No, I won't do such a foolhardy thing."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Eberts."

She started to argue, but seeing the resolute look on his bronzed face, she realized that she could not sway him. She was a high-spirited girl, courageous, and, because of ignorance of conditions along and below the Border, a bit foolish. She was suddenly angry and out of her anger she said heatedly:

"Very well, Captain. But I'll find a way!"

She whirled around, jerked open the door, slammed it after her as she left the room. He started to follow her, then checked the impulse. She would feel differently after thinking it over, he told.

himself. She wouldn't be so foolish as to venture south of the Border alone, or in the company of some stranger. He knew little about headstrong young women, but he was certain that Katherine's show of temper would quickly pass. . . .

The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles reached the abandoned Shamrock Mine at mid-morning. Bob Pryor was in his uniform; he had the cowhand duds his partner had bought in his bedroll behind Saber's saddle. They had left their pack-horse in Valido, traveling light to make better time.

They found the old mine in a stretch of forbidding rocky land, and not much of a development. The tunnel entered the base of a rugged slope, and the tailings from it were heaped about nearby. There was a single building, a plank shack with a sagging roof and a door hanging by only one hinge.

The two men dismounted, entered the shack. It contained four bunks, a crude plank table, benches, and a rusty stove. A couple of empty tin cans and a bottle lay on the earthern floor. Dust was thick over everything. Pryor had talked to Colonel Avery again that morning and had learned that he had been instructed, in the first note from the bandits, to place the ransom money in the stove.

Crossing to the stove, the Rio Kid lifted the lids and looked into it. He found nothing but wood ashes. The two thousand dollars and the note that Avery had placed there several nights before were gone. One or more of the bandits had been there since the colonel's visit.

THE PARTNERS went outside and searched for tracks, hoping that there would be a trail they could follow. They could see where Colonel Avery had ridden in, for he had made no attempt to hide his coming and going. They also found sign of another rider, in the immediate vicinity of the mine, but soon lost his tracks among the rocks surrounding the place.

The Rio Kid said, "Well, all we've learned, *amigo*, is that one rider came to get the second ransom payment."

Mireles nodded. "The hombre picked his spot with care, General. He knew that he could not be tracked far through this rock country. What is our next move?"

"We'll head for Aquila Plaza," Pryor said, "as soon as I've changed into my cowboy duds."

He got the clothes from his bedroll, then frowned over them. From Stetson to half-boots, they were too new looking. A drifting cowboy wouldn't be wearing store-fresh clothing. He handed the hat and boots to Mireles, and said, "Give them a working over, Celestino."

He took the shirt and levis to the nearby creek, soaked them, and stretched them out on a boulder to dry. The heat of the rock and the blazing Arizona sun would dry the clothes in minutes. Shirt and levis would then have a wrinkled and somewhat faded look, instead of a brand-new appearance. Meanwhile, Mireles scuffed the shine off the boots with gravel and rubbed some dust into the gray Stetson. By the time Pryor donned the clothes, he looked like a cowhand who had outfitted himself a month or two ago. He carefully folded his uniform and placed in it one of Saber's saddle-bags.

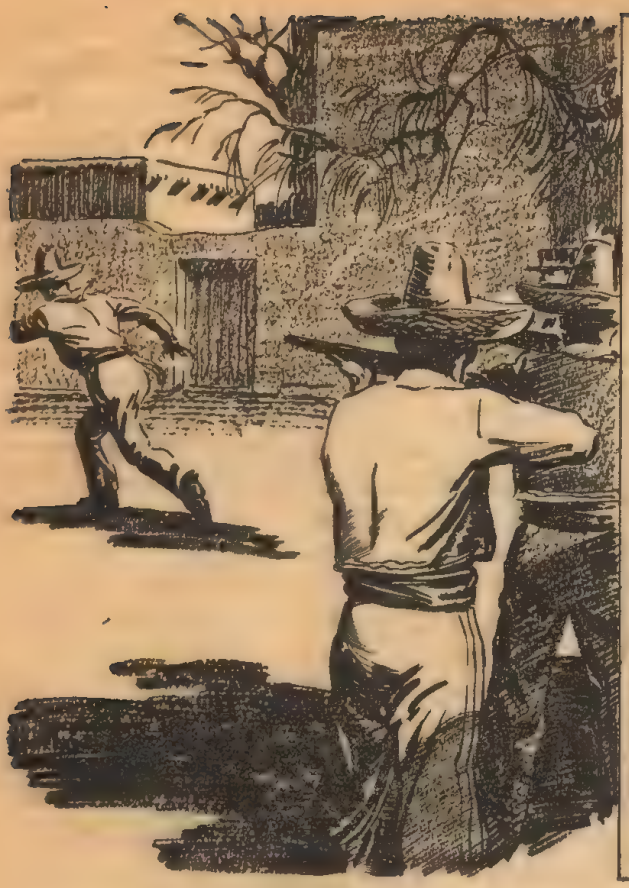
They mounted and rode southeast, toward the road from Valido into Old Mexico, reaching the Border an hour after leaving the abandoned mine. A small adobe town straddled the Border, and the Customs officers on the Arizona side had stopped a freight rig coming in from Mexico to inspect its cargo. They did not stop the two riders, but the Mexican Customs officers halted them.

"Where you go, hombres? And why you come to Mexico?"

"We go on a holiday," Mireles said, smiling. "We have some back wages to spend."

The inspector grinned. "So you will spend your money on *vino* and *senoritas*, eh?" he said, and waved them on.

They rode through the Mexican half of the town, followed the road south



EMILIO KOSTERLITSKY

EMILIO KOSTERLITSKY was born in Moscow, Russia, November 16, 1853, and nineteen years later, in 1872, deserted from a Russian man-of-war in South America. Making his way to Mexico, he joined the Mexican army as a cavalry officer. In 1886, he was placed in command of the Border *Rurales* and held that post until 1913.

He had had military training in Russia, and was one of President Diaz' finest, officers. He usually went into battle riding a mule. As head of the *Rurales*, Kosterlitsky cooperated with Arizona lawmen in campaigns against the powerful lawless element on both sides of the Border. He seldom took real trouble-makers to court. He had a saying, "They got away, but just a little way." He believed in *ley del fuga*. His prisoners were forever escaping—and getting killed at it.

When the Madera revolution broke out, Kosterlitsky survived the bitter fighting, but his loyalist troops were surrounded finally by superior numbers. Knowing that he would be 'dobe-walled if he surrendered, Kosterlitsky marched his soldiers across to Nogales, Arizona, under a flag of truce. He was disarmed, held in a detention camp. He never returned to Mexico. In his old age, he became attached to the United States Department of Justice at San Diego. He died March 2, 1928.

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through empty country. They had traveled only a couple of miles when, upon topping a rise, they saw a string of freight wagons ahead of them. There were four big mule-drawn rigs, and they had come to a halt. The teamsters were gathered about the rear wagon and seemed to be involved in an argument.

Mireles exclaimed, "General, there is a woman with those hombres!"

The Rio Kid had seen that, and more. He had recognized the woman.

Katherine Eberts.

For a moment surprise held the two riders atop the rise, a hundred yards from the rear wagon. Bob Pryor was

badly jolted. It had been no idle threat the girl had made last night when she'd said she would find a way to reach the Aquila Plaza country. The outfit belonged to Matt Kerrigan's Valido Freighting Company and Katherine must have got one of the teamsters to bring her along in his wagon. One of the teamsters, a burly black-bearded man, grabbed her by the arm. The girl struck at the man's face, tried to pull away from him. Pryor's face hardened.

"Come along, *amigo*," he said, and touched spurs to Saber.

The teamsters turned at the drumming of hoofs. The girl managed to get loose of the burly man's grip, but in doing so she fell to her knees. Mireles swore in Spanish at that, and the Rio Kid himself felt a quick and ugly anger.

They reined in facing the four teamsters, a tough lot. The burly man with the black beard stepped forward, growling, "Get on your way, you saddle-tramps. This is none of your business."

"We're making it our business."

"So? We'll see about that!"

The man had a whip coiled in his right hand. With lightninglike speed, he lashed out with it. The Rio Kid ducked, but the lash struck his mount. Saber shrieked with fright and pain, then reared and struck out with his forelegs. A shod hoof struck the burly man's chest, bowled him over, and he lay dazed. The Rio Kid wheeled Saber away, gave him a low-voiced command to stand still, and dropped from the saddle.

ONE of the other men called, "Watch it, Harper—watch it!" The burly man scrambled up, ready to fight. The Rio Kid was going to Katharine, but whirled to meet the man's rush.

He was outweighed by perhaps thirty pounds, but he made up with skill and speed for what he lacked in brawn. He sidestepped Harper's lunge, drove two short, hard jabs to the teamster's bearded face. Harper howled with pain and rage, reeled against the Rio Kid, slammed him back against the rear wheel of the nearest wagon.

The Rio Kid was pinned against the wheel while Harper battered him about the body. Then he dropped into a crouch and flung himself sideward at the teamster's knees. Harper backed away, tried to boot the lighter man in the face. The Rio Kid got a two-handed grip on Harper's kicking leg, heaved up on it, spilled him over backward. Harper bellowed an oath, jumped up, grabbed out his gun.

The Rio Kid was ready for him. He drove a heavy punch to the ugly, bearded face. Harper froze. The gun dropped from his hand. His face took on a stupid look, then he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

The Rio Kid whirled, but found that Mireles had drawn his gun and was covering the other three teamsters. Going to Katherine, who had picked herself up, the Rio Kid said, "You're all right? They didn't hurt you?"

"N-o-o," Katherine stammered. "I—I'm all right."

But she was badly shaken.

Mireles kept his gun out until the freighting outfit moved on. The teamsters had helped Harper to his feet, when he regained consciousness, and helped him mount to the box of the lead rig. Harper had given the Rio Kid one hate-filled look as he drove on, and Mireles said, "You have made a bad enemy in that hombre, General." Pryor merely shrugged. It wasn't likely, he thought then, that he would encounter Harper again.

He turned to Katherine Eberts, half angry with her, and half-admiring her foolhardy spunk. He said, "What happened, anyway?"

"I—I stowed away on one of the wagons just before it left Colonel Avery's warehouse this morning," Katherine said unsteadily. "I just had to get to Mexico and—"

"And rescue Steve?"

"You're laughing at me, Captain Pryor!"

"No, not really," he said. "But it's impossible, Miss Eberts. You're still far

from the part of Mexico where Steve is being held prisoner. And it's not safe for a woman to travel into that wild country. Haven't you learned your lesson—from that brute, Harper?"

Katherine didn't answer. There was a resolute look about her. She was wearing riding clothes—a mannish Stetson, a gray shirt, a divided skirt with a wide fancy belt, boots. She had brought a small traveling bag. It stood on the ground. She looked very young, like a small willful girl determined to do as she pleased no matter what anyone else said or did. Studying her, the Rio Kid knew that it would do no good to take her back to Valido. She would merely set out again at the first opportunity. He sighed with resignation.

"All right, you can come with us," he said. "You'll be safer with Celestino and me than alone or with anyone else."

Katherine's face glowed with a sudden smile, and in her eyes the two men saw that exultant look that comes to a woman who finally gets her way after a stubborn clash of wills.

Pryor mounted Saber, kept the dun from acting up by a sharp command, then took Katherine up with him. The horse could easily carry double, but Saber snorted with disapproval. The Rio Kid smiled a little, wondering if Saber wasn't a bit jealous due to his rider having his arm about a beautiful girl.

They rode south, circling wide about the four freight wagons farther along the road. Late in the afternoon they came to a *rancho* where they were able to buy a mount for Katherine. The Mexican rancher also had a spare saddle he was willing to sell. They rode on, making better time now, with Katherine riding between the two men on a pretty pinto pony.

The Rio Kid asked her, "You didn't leave without telling Colonel Avery?"

Katherine said, "I left a note for him."

"Still, he'll be worried. And he has plenty already to worry about."

"I'll write him a letter when we get to a town," she said. "And tell him that I'm in the best of company." She laughed a little. "Matt Kerrigan is the one," she added. "He'll be furious when he learns that I stowed away in one of his wagons. Especially after he refused to give me permission to travel with the outfit when I asked him yesterday."

"You don't like Kerrigan, do you?"

HER moment of amusement was past. "No," she said gravely. "No, I don't." Then, after a pause: "And I don't trust him."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's a feeling I have about him."

"Woman's intuition?"

"Is that any less trustworthy than a man's hunches?" Katherine asked tartly. "I may be wrong in feeling that he's not to be trusted, but I don't believe I am. For one thing, he is too sure that Steve is—" her voice faltered— "is dead, or will be killed. Why should he be so sure?"

"A mistaken hunch, maybe," Pryor told her.

"He knows that I feel that Steve is alive and that I'm in love with Steve," she went on, "yet he is altogether too attentive to me. It's flattering to a girl to know that a man finds her attractive, but Matt Kerrigan—Well, there is something offensive about his attentions. He's too possessive, for one thing. He seems to take it for granted that if Steve doesn't come back I'll accept him as a suitor. He tells me how important he is in Valido, that he has such a promising future in Arizona Territory, that he is a good catch. I can't trust a man who attempts to make love to another man's fiancée."

"On the other hand," the Rio Kid reminded her, "he raised eight thousand dollars for the second ransom payment."

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"I don't know," she said lamely. "Except that I neither like nor trust Matt Kerrigan. He is a man who says and does one thing while thinking another,

and no one can guess what he is really thinking. I—"

Mireles called, "Riders coming, General!"

CHAPTER V

The Russian Is Powerful

REINING in, the Rio Kid saw the half-dozen horsemen coming along the road. They were Mexicans, well-mounted and heavily armed. They wore high-peaked sombreros. There were bandoliers across their chests. They looked tough, hard, arrogant. But for their traveling so openly along a main road, the Rio Kid might have suspected them of being *bandidos*.

He hazarded a guess: *"Rurales!"*

The six horsemen reined in, five abreast across the road and one in front of the line. He was a swarthy man, small of stature, wiry-looking. He had a big, up-pointed mustache.

"Buenos dias," he said. "Who are you, my friends? You come from across the Border?"

Mireles said, "We come from there, *senor*. We are just visitors, seeing a little of Mexico." He smiled, shrugged. "We have little money."

"We are not *bandidos*, hombre," the swarthy man said curtly. "On the contrary. We are *Rurales*. I am Captain Diego."

"We are honored to know *El Capitan*," Mireles said, bowing. "There is a town ahead, perhaps, where we can get lodging for the night?"

Diego did not answer. Instead, he gave an order in Spanish. Two of his men rode forward, came around behind the three travelers. One man leaned from the saddle, reached into Saber's nearer saddle-bag, brought out the coat to Bob Pryor's uniform.

"Capitan!" he cried, and held the garment up for the officer to see.

"Hola!" Diego exclaimed. *"Que es?"*

His dark eyes glittered as he recognized the coat as a part of a United States Army uniform. Then, regarding Pryor with unconcealed suspicion, he said, "You come with us. You and your friends."

"Are we under arrest?" Pryor asked.

"At the moment, no," Diego replied. "But you will come with us, anyway."

Pryor shrugged. There was nothing to do but obey. He knew enough about the *Rurales*, the Mexican equivalent of the Texas Rangers, to realize that arguing would gain him nothing and that resistance would be sheer folly. Too, he could not blame the captain for being suspicious. He also would have wondered what was going on if he had found a man with a Mexican Army officer's uniform in his saddle-bag when north of the Border.

He said, to Mireles and Katherine, "Don't worry. We'll be released as soon as these men let us talk to their commanding officer."

He would have been less confident had he known that they were to be taken before the chief of the border *Rurales*, the ruthless Colonel Emilio Kosterlitsky who was, though a Russian, a power in Mexico.

They rode into the town of Santa Rosita at dusk. The main plaza was practically a *Rurale* camp. More than two dozen of the heavily armed, tough-visaged men of that police organization loitered about the plaza. More than that number of mounts stood about, all sturdy animals. The town was quiet, however, with people going about their affairs and barefoot children at play.

Diego's patrol with the three prisoners crossed the plaza to an inn. The captain dismounted, said curtly, "You will wait here." He strode through the *posada's* doorway, past the two men on sentry duty.

He turned shortly, saying, "Come,

the three of you."

They dismounted, Pryor helping Katherine and Mireles looking somewhat anxious. Like most Mexicans, Celestino Mireles knew that the *Rurales* not only enforced the law but often made the law to suit themselves. They were to be respected—and feared.

There was but one person in the public room of the inn, and for a lengthy moment he ignored the three who entered with Diego. The man was not a Mexican, the Rio Kid saw at a glance. He was in uniform, seated rigidly at a table upon which a map was spread. He was studying the map with a great deal of concentration. His coarsely handsome face was expressionless, cold, haughty. A huge flowing mustache adorned his upper lip, and his hair was gray at the temples.

When he looked up, the man's eyes were black and glittering—probing eyes, arrogant eyes mirroring an iron will and a ruthless nature. A kepi and a sword lay upon the part of the table not covered by the map. Glancing at the sword, a Cossack sword, the Rio Kid knew that the man was the famed Kosterlitsky.

HARDENED as he was by long contact with dangerous men, the Rio Kid felt a measure of uneasiness as the colonel's eyes looked into his. He remembered some of the stories he had heard about Kosterlitsky; about the mercilessly disciplining of his own men, of the captives who dug their own graves, of how prisoners were disposed of by *ley del fuga.* The Rio Kid's uneasiness lasted but a moment, however. He strode boldly to the table, his gaze never wavering before the older man's flat stare.

"Would you mind explaining—"

"You do the explaining, my friend," Kosterlitsky cut in. "You visit Mexico in the clothes of a cowhand, yet you carry a United States Army uniform in your saddle-bag. What is your name?"

"Robert Pryor."

"You hold a commission in the United States Army?"

"No. I am retired."

"But the uniform?"

Pryor shrugged. "A man doesn't completely discard the uniform he was honored to wear. I think the Colonel, being a soldier, understands that."

Kosterlitsky's stony countenance was touched by a wispy smile. He glanced at Captain Diego and told him to wait outside. When the captain had left the room, Kosterlitsky said, "Now Captain Pryor, just what sort of mission brings the Rio Kid to Mexico?" He smiled again, seeing Pryor's surprise. "Yes, I know about you, Captain. It is my business to know about all sorts of men, on both sides of the Border. Your *compadre* is Celestino Mireles, a man worth knowing about in his own right." He glanced at Mireles, then at Katherine Eberts. "The lady I do not know, however." Again he looked at the Rio Kid. "Your mission, Captain?"

"Does a man need a mission to bring him on a visit to Mexico?"

"You do, I think."

"If I have a mission, it's not one that would cause me to break any laws. So it wouldn't interest the *Rurales.*"

"Let me be the judge of what interests the *Rurales,* Captain Pryor."

Pryor frowned, not knowing what course to follow. The first ransom note received by Colonel Avery had warned that the kidnaping of Steve Avery should not be brought to the attention of any law officers. If Kosterlitsky learned of the affair, he would attempt to do something about it—thereby almost certainly signing young Avery's death warrant, as it were. On the other hand, trouble could come to the Rio Kid and his companions should information be withheld from the *Rurale* chief.

Kosterlitsky was all-powerful. He answered only to Mexico City, and it wasn't likely that even *El Presidente* asked many questions of him. Bob Pryor knew well that Kosterlitsky had the power of life or death over all who came within reach of the guns of his *Rurales.*

The Rio Kid said, "If I give my word that we shall do nothing against the best interests of Mexico, would it be sufficient for the Colonel?"

"You have a reputation for being a man of honor, Captain."

"Then?"

"On the other hand, I have a very curious mind—especially about the Rio Kid."

"I don't mind answering questions about the Rio Kid, sir."

Kosterlitsky smiled his faint smile again. "Just so long as the questions do not touch on your secret mission, eh?" He paused to light a cigar. Then he went on: "You came into Mexico from Valido. A man named Phil Avery operates a business in Valido. He sells mining machinery, tools, explosives, and other supplies. Senor Avery has a son who is employed as a mining engineer here in Sonora. The son has disappeared. He has been captured by bandits, and is being held for ransom. I think, Captain, that you come to Mexico because of some foolish notion that the Rio Kid can rescue Steve Avery. You see? Emilio Kosterlitsky is no fool. There is nothing he does not see and hear and know."

LIKE Mireles, Katherine had been silent since entering the *posada*. But now she said heatedly, "Since you know so much, Colonel, why haven't you rescued Steve Avery?"

"Ah, the lady knows how to ask a question!"

"This is no joking matter to me," Katherine said furiously. "Steve Avery is my fiancé. So far as I am concerned, he is the most important man in the world!"

"I have been wondering about you, senorita."

"Now you know about me. My name is Katherine Eberts, and I am not frightened by bandits or by *Rurales*. Why haven't you rescued Steve Avery, Colonel?"

"For the same reason that I do not reach for the moon," said Kosterlitsky somberly. "It is like this, Senorita Eberts. Your fiancé is in the hands of a crowd of bandits that has for years managed to elude my *Rurales*. Sometimes we kill or capture some of them, but always the leader — one called *El Bribon* — finds new recruits. He has many men, good fighting men, and strongholds in the mountains. Some day we shall catch him, and 'dobe-wall him. Maybe it will be tomorrow, or next week, or next year. I do not know. But if we go into the mountains after him and keep after him until we frighten him, he will kill Steve Avery."

Katherine looked frightened. She turned to Pryor, and said hopelessly, "If Colonel Kosterlitsky and his *Rurales* can't rescue Steve, what chance have we?"

"I don't know at the moment, Katherine." By now she had asked the Rio Kid and Celestino to call her "Katherine."

"The ransom?" Kosterlitsky said. "It has been paid?"

Pryor nodded. "The first ransom demand was met. Ten thousand dollars was paid. Then another ten thousand was demanded. Colonel Avery has paid two thousand of it, and will pay the other eight thousand when he again hears from *El Bribon*."

Kosterlitsky frowned. "That I do not like," he said. "It seems that—well, that the bandits are bleeding the father because the son is no longer alive. *El Bribon* has kidnaped people before, but always he has released them upon a single payment of ransom." He was silent a moment, then added, as though thinking aloud, "Perhaps I should go into the mountains after *El Bribon* without waiting for him to reveal whether Steve Avery is dead or alive."

"No," the Rio Kid said emphatically. "We can't endanger Steve, Colonel. I'm convinced that he is still alive. *El Bribon* may have his own reasons for demanding more ransom. Maybe he thinks that Steve's father is a rich man. I'd like to have a try at rescuing the young man."

The Russian considered a moment, puffing on his cigar and sizing up Pryor. A somewhat sardonic look masked his face finally, and he said, "Very well, Captain. I'll permit that. I think the Rio Kid may make things easier for me. You may lead me to *El Bribon.*"

"Thanks," the Rio Kid said, with a trace of sarcasm.

"But I warn you, you'll be taking your life in your own hands."

"I'm willing to run the risk," Katherine responded.

"If you fall into *El Bribon's* hands, you will die a horrible death. I know, for I have looked upon the bodies of some of my *Rurales* who were captured by those *bandidos.*" Kosterlitsky glanced at Katherine. "There is one thing I won't permit," he added sternly. "Senorita Eberts may not accompany you farther. She must either return to Arizona or remain here in Santa Rosita."

"No!" Katherine said fiercely. "I am going on!"

"What will happen to Captain Pryor if he is captured," Kosterlitsky broke in, "is only a small thing compared to what would happen to a lovely woman caught by the bandits."

"I am not afraid."

"Senorita, you will stay in Santa Rosita or return to Arizona."

"But—"

"I, Emilio Kosterlitsky, have spoken!"

The interview was over. The colonel again gave his attention to his map. The Rio Kid tried to make the angry, disappointed Katherine understand that it was better for her to remain in Santa Rosita with Kosterlitsky while he and Mireles went on.

He summoned the proprietor of the *posada,* ordered supper. The three of them ate, and all the while Kosterlitsky sat at the nearby table and studied his map.

After the meal, Pryor had the innkeeper show the girl to an upstairs room. Mireles went out to fetch her traveling bag.

CHAPTER VI

Guarded Mine

WHEN Mireles later went out to look after their horses, Kosterlitsky called Bob Pryor to his table.

"Look at this map, Captain," he invited. "Here is Aquila Plaza, a mountain town that every so often the *Rurales* must clean up. Not even Tombstone in Arizona is as wild a town as Aquila Plaza. Here, seven miles from the plaza, is the Celestial Mine where Senor Avery was employed. He left the mine riding a mule, heading for Aquila Plaza where he intended to take a stage-coach to Santa Rosita. He never reached the plaza. Somewhere along the trail, he was captured by the bandits."

He drew a finger along a portion of the map. "Here are the Sierra Aquilas," he continued. "Wild mountain country. It's one old stamping-grounds of the Apaches, and *El Bribon* knows those mountains better than any man. In fact, he and his mother were captured by Apaches when he was a small boy. They killed his father, carried off the woman and the boy. The woman lasted a year or two under the rough treatment the Apache bucks gave her, but the boy lived. He was with the Indians for seven years before being rescued by the Mexican Army." Kosterlitsky shrugged. "Perhaps his life with the Apaches made him what he is today. At any rate, he can lose himself in the Aquilas when *Los Rurales* or *soldados* make it hot for him."

"Any Americans in his band?"

"Yes. Why do you ask that?"

"The ransom notes were written in English."

"I suspected that," Kosterlitsky said. "*El Bribon* always has an American *renegado* or two with him because they can point out profitable ventures for

him. No doubt Avery's kidnaping was plotted by one of *El Bribon's* gringo lieutenants." He studied the Rio Kid. "I think I know what is in your mind, Captain. You have some thought of contacting *El Bribon* by posing as an *Americano* on the dodge from the law. You will pretend to be an outlaw, no?"

"The idea occurred to me."

"It might work."

"If I go to Aquila Plaza, would I have a chance of reaching *El Bribon?*"

Again the sardonic look masked Kosterlitsky's face. "Aquila Plaza is the jumping-off place to hell," he said. "Yes, I think that an American outlaw would have a good chance of meeting *El Bribon* at Aquila Plaza—sooner or later. If the American manages to stay alive."

"You don't think much of my chances, do you, Colonel?"

"Perhaps the Rio Kid leads a charmed life."

"Not exactly. He trusts to his wits and his guns, and a bit to luck."

Kosterlitsky laughed. "He is a man after my own heart, this Rio Kid," he said. Then, sobering, "If you should manage to stay alive and rescue Steve Avery, you will have learned much about *El Bribon* and his *bandidos*. I shall expect you to report to me afterward, Captain. To make sure that you do not keep any worthwhile information from me, I shall have a couple of *Rurales* in Aquila Plaza to keep an eye on you. They, too, will be posing as outlaws, of course."

Before the Rio Kid could reply to that, Captain Diego appeared at the doorway. Catching Kosterlitsky's eye, the captain saluted and said, "There is an *Americano* outside, Colonel. His name is Kerrigan, and he says that he has come to take the senorita back to Arizona. Shall I permit him to enter?"

Kosterlitsky smiled thinly. "A beautiful woman attracts men as surely as a honey-pot attracts ants. Yes, show the man in, Captain."

Matt Kerrigan strode into the room, brushing past Captain Diego. He was sweaty and dusty from his long, hard ride. His rather handsome face was stiff with anger, and he said curtly, "You're Kosterlitsky, I suppose. By what authority do you keep people from entering a public place?" He waited for no reply, but swung about to face Bob Pryor. "As for you, Captain," he said bitterly, "I thought that you had better sense than to bring a young woman along on such a trip!"

Pryor smiled, somewhat amused. "Kerrigan, it's kind of funny when a man your age makes a fool of himself over a girl as young as Miss Eberts. Especially when she is to marry another man. You've talked to your teamster, Harper, it seems."

KERRIGAN flushed, and something like hate flickered in his eyes. "I've talked to Harper," he said flatly. "I came to Mexico as soon as I learned from Phil Avery that Katherine had stowed away on one of my wagons. As for my being interested in the lady— Well, I can't see that it concerns anyone but her and me."

"And Steve Avery."

"If he is alive."

"I prefer to think he is alive."

"Suit yourself about that," Kerrigan said. "I've got to see that no harm comes to Miss Eberts, and I intend to take her back to Valido."

The Rio Kid's smile faded, his face turned rocky. "I think she'll have something to say about that," he said. "She's made up her mind to stay here in Santa Rosita until I've had a try at rescuing Steve Avery." He nodded toward Colonel Kosterlitsky. "I think the Colonel will see to it that she comes to no harm here—and that no one, including you, causes her any annoyance."

Kerrigan looked at one man and then the other, the ugly anger still in his eyes. "So you've asked the help of the *Rurales*, have you, Pryor? Well, that's the one step that will cause the bandits to kill Avery, providing they haven't already killed him. The ransom note warned old Colonel Avery not to ask

help from the Law."

Kosterlitsky said coldly, "You talk much but say little, Senor Kerrigan. Captain Pryor has not asked for help. As for my knowing about the kidnaping—well, I am no fool. I know what goes on here in Mexico."

"But you do nothing about it?"

"Meaning what, Senor Kerrigan?"

"Meaning that you haven't rounded up these bandits!" Kerrigan said hotly. "If I were in your boots, I wouldn't be wasting my time sitting here while bandits terrorize the countryside I'm supposed to police. But maybe you find it dangerous to go after the *bandidos*."

Kosterlitsky struck the table with his fist, leaped to his feet. His dark eyes glittered, his mustache bristled. "Senor, never before has anyone questioned the courage of Emilio Kosterlitsky. I demand—"

The Rio Kid stepped between them.

"Don't be hasty, Colonel," he said. "After all, Kerrigan is under a strain. When a man fears for the safety of the woman he desires—" He shrugged, smiled. "You must understand, sir, being a man of the world."

He saw the anger fade from the Russian's face.

He continued, "Now if you'll excuse me, sir, I'll get started for Aquila Plaza."

"Tonight, Captain? You are indeed anxious to face almost certain death."

"Too much time has been wasted already."

"Perhaps you are right," Kosterlitsky said. "*Vaya con Dios.*"

The Rio Kid said drily, "Thanks," and turned toward the door. The angry Matt Kerrigan did not so much as wish him luck. . . .

At sunup, after a night of steady riding, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles stopped at a *rancho* in the hope of obtaining breakfast for themselves, and some water and grain for their horses. The *ranchero* took them for saddle tramps and was reluctant to accommodate them until Mireles explained in Spanish that they would pay.

They remained at the *rancho*, which was in the foothills, for two hours until their mounts were well rested, then set out toward the craggy heights of the Sierra Aquilas. They were well into the mountains by mid-afternoon, the road now a torturous trail that climbed steep grades and twisted through rock-walled gulches. The country became wilder, more primitive and forbidding, with each mile.

At dusk the two riders saw their first mine in the Aquilas. It was the Epitaph Mine, operated by the Arizona-Sonora Mining Company, and an amiable man named Creighton was its superintendent. The Epitaph was worked by Mexicans under American foremen, and working conditions seemed to be good there. Creighton invited the two travelers to have supper and stay the night, and they gladly accepted.

Armed guards were posted about the property — "against the chance of a bandit raid," Creighton told the travelers. High-grade ore was being taken from the mine, and it was hauled by wagons to a stamp-mill thirty miles away where the silver, and also a small amount of gold, was extracted from the rock.

IN THE morning, after breakfast with the miners, the Rio Kid and Mireles again set out along the road. It led them through brush and timber, through boulder-strewn gulches, across high ridges, and brought them finally to the Celestial Mine where Steve Avery had been employed.

They came first upon a signpost that read:

CELESTIAL MINE
Private Property—No Trespassing
Keep Out!

They halted beside the sign, peering at the rugged slope upon which, midway up, the mine was located. A track extended from inside the mine tunnel and along an embankment, and mule-drawn ore cars moved to and fro upon it. The big ore wagons pulled in on a lower level,

and the rock was dumped from the cars into them. Tailings from the tunnel were carried farther out across the face of the slope and dumped, with a great clatter and a huge rising of dust, downslope. There was a large number of unpainted buildings and shacks nearby.

"We go up there, General?" Mireles asked.

"Sure," Bob Pryor said. "Why not?"

"The sign—"

The Rio Kid chuckled. "Who knows up there?" he said. "Maybe we can't read."

They started on, but almost at once a voice growled, "That's far enough, hombres!" A man with a rifle in the crook of his arm stepped from behind a nearby jumble of boulders. He was a grizzled old-timer with a tobacco cud bulging his left cheek. He spat tobacco juice, and said, "Turn back the way you came, pronto."

They reined in, the Rio Kid saying, "What's the idea, mister?"

"Strangers ain't welcome around here."

"Suppose we're looking for jobs?"

The old man looked them over. "You hombres look like cowhands to me," he said. "We don't do any cowpunching around here." He chuckled, as at a joke. "No jobs open here, buckos—not unless you're mining engineers."

"So your boss is still looking for a mining engineer, eh?"

"That's right."

"Steve Avery's still missing, then?"

The guard looked surprised. "Knew Avery, did you?" he asked.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "We just heard he'd been kidnaped by bandits. Any truth to that?"

"Don't know," the old-timer said. "I heard that story, but I don't put too much stock in what I hear. Been too long in Mexico. Down here a man hears the darnedest things. Well, gents—*Adios.*"

The Rio Kid refused to take that as dismissal. He didn't fear the old man's rifle; he seemed like an amiable old codger. "I'd like to talk to your boss," he said. "About Steve Avery."

The guard chewed methodically for a while, studying Pryor intently. Then he said: "That's Ben Maury. He's the superintendent of the Celestial. He's mean and tough, and he's apt to have you run off the property. But if you want to risk it— Well, that's up to you."

He turned and looked upslope, then whistled shrilly in signal. Another guard appeared from a shack midway between the old-timer's post and the mine. The old man waved to him, then said to the Rio Kid and Mireles, "All right. Go on up."

They rode to the shack, but were halted there by the second guard. "Going to blast," he told them.

They saw that a string of mule-drawn cars had come from the tunnel and was moving far out along the embankment. The several ore-loaded wagons on the lower level were pulling out, descending a road that zigzagged back and forth as it ran to the bottom of the slope. Men came from the tunnel mouth, perhaps a hundred and fifty of them, and all but a half-dozen were Chinese. It appeared that no Mexican miners were employed at the Celestial.

THE blast came shortly after the crew of powdermen emerged from the tunnel. There was a great rumbling deep in the mine. The ground tremored. A huge puff of dust and smoke shot from the tunnel entrance; then, as it cleared away, the miners returned to the tunnel. And a burly man in khaki shirt and pants and high-laced boots came striding toward the guard shack where the visitors waited. There was a scowl on his heavy, ruddy face. He looked to be a man who had a grudge against the world.

The guard said, "I don't know what these hombres want, Ben." He was almost servile before the big man. "Old Charlie let them come up."

Ben Maury ignored Celestino Mireles after one brief, sour look. Then, staring

at the Rio Kid, he growled, "There's nothing around here for drifting cowhands. We don't give handout meals to anybody, let alone to saddle tramps." His tone was even more insulting than his words.

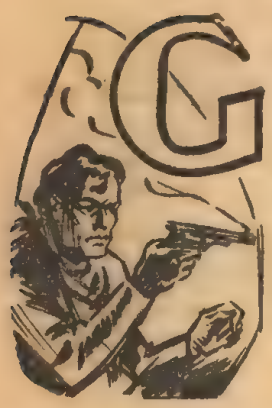
Mireles said, "This hombre is one big talker."

The Rio Kid nodded. "But his bark is worse than his bite, I'll bet," he replied. He watched Maury's face turn a brighter red. "I reckon he gets that way from bossing a lot of poor, dumb Chinese coolies."

Maury swore, rushed forward.

CHAPTER VII

An Old-Timer Talks



GIVING a sharp command, the Rio Kid swung Saber around. The dun bared his teeth, snorted wildly, reared, kicked out. Ben Maury froze, a sudden look of fright on his face. He swore again, in a startled fashion.

Bringing Saber under control, the Rio Kid said, "I don't want any trouble here, mister." His tone was slightly mocking. He sized the mine boss up as all bluster. "I just want to ask some questions — about Steve Avery."

A wary look masked Maury's face. "What about Avery?"

"I hear he's disappeared. What happened to him?"

"How should I know? He asked for a week off, but never came back to work."

"You didn't hear that he was captured by bandits?"

"I heard it," Maury said. "It could be true. All I know is that I'm without an engineer, and if I can hire another, Avery will play hell getting his job back —if he shows up again. Look! Is he a friend of yours?"

The Rio Kid shrugged, said nothing. He glanced over the mine property again, then said, "Well, we'll mosey along. Since strangers aren't welcome around here." He turned Saber away, Mireles following him.

Maury said loudly, "Hold on there, you. I want to know—"

They went on downslope, not even looking back.

Mireles was puzzled. "You didn't ask many questions, General."

The Rio Kid smiled faintly. "I wouldn't have got any answers," he said. "I found out what I wanted to know. They don't expect Steve Avery back here. But I really came to look over the place. Maybe you noticed, *amigo*, that the Celestial Mine employs a lot of Chinese. No Mexicans. Steve was passing information about the smuggling of Chinese to Jeff Milton, and he must have picked up that information here."

"That means this place has something to do with the smuggling, no?"

"I'm sure it has. And I'm beginning to wonder if maybe Steve got into trouble because of what he learned about the smuggling. Maybe he knew too much, and somebody decided to get rid of him —with the help of *El Bribon* and his *bandidos*."

"In that case, he will not be released alive, even when all the ransom is paid," Mireles said worriedly. "General, it is not going to be an easy thing, our rescuing Steve Avery."

The Rio Kid nodded gravely to that.

They passed the rocks where the old man stood guard. He winked meaningfully at them, and said low-voiced, "One of you hombres stop by the spring down the road."

The Rio Kid lifted a hand to show that he understood. If Ben Maury were watching, he would think it nothing more than a friendly gesture of farewell.

They saw the spring among a cluster of rocks to the left of the road, well out of sight of the mine. Pryor halted there, said, "Ride on a way, *amigo*, and keep watch."

He waited for perhaps ten minutes, then saw old Charlie coming down from the slope as though to get a drink. The guard kept looking back, to make sure he was not being followed. He was carrying his rifle and also a canteen. He motioned to Pryor, then went to the spring to fill his canteen. The Rio Kid dismounted, led Saber to the water and let him drink.

"Only can take a minute," Charlie said, in a hoarse whisper. "Don't want anybody up there to know I'm talking to you. You hombres must be friends of Steve Avery's, else you wouldn't be here asking questions about him. Me, I was friendly with him, too. A fine young feller, Steve. I know there's talk that he was captured by bandits, but— Well, I ain't so sure."

"You know something, Charlie?"

"I know Big Jess Harper tried to kill Steve some time back."

"Harper? A teamster for the Valido Freighting Company?"

"Yeah," the old man said. "Big hombre with black whiskers. It was the last time Harper hauled some freight in here to the mine. He picked a fight with Steve. For no reason that I could see. He just up and insulted the young feller, called him some ugly names. Steve didn't take it, and there was a brawl. It was just what Harper wanted. He pulled his gun after he began getting the worse of it, and it was as plain as the nose on my face, mister, that he wanted to gun Steve down. It was in his eyes, and in the way he was smiling. He would have gut-shot Steve, but for me."

"So? What did you do, Charlie?"

"I knocked the gun out of Harper's hand with a pick handle."

"Did you talk to Steve about the fight afterward?"

CHARLIE nodded. "He said Harper aimed to kill him because he'd learned something big about the Chinese smuggling that's going on," he said, looking about uneasily. "I got to be going. Anyway, Steve was plenty worried even after Harper pulled out in his wagon. He figured that he was a marked man, that the smugglers were out to get him. When he left the mine to go to Arizona that day, he carried a rifle across his saddle. He never got to Aquila Plaza—or so folks say. I figure that maybe somebody — Harper or some smuggler friend of Harper's—bushwhacked him. Maybe the bandits got him, but I'm not sure of it." He peered at the Rio Kid with rheumy eyes. "That any help to you, mister?"

"Yeah, Charlie," Pryor said. "Did Steve say that Harper was involved in the smuggling?"

"Not in so many words. But he sure suspected Harper, I reckon."

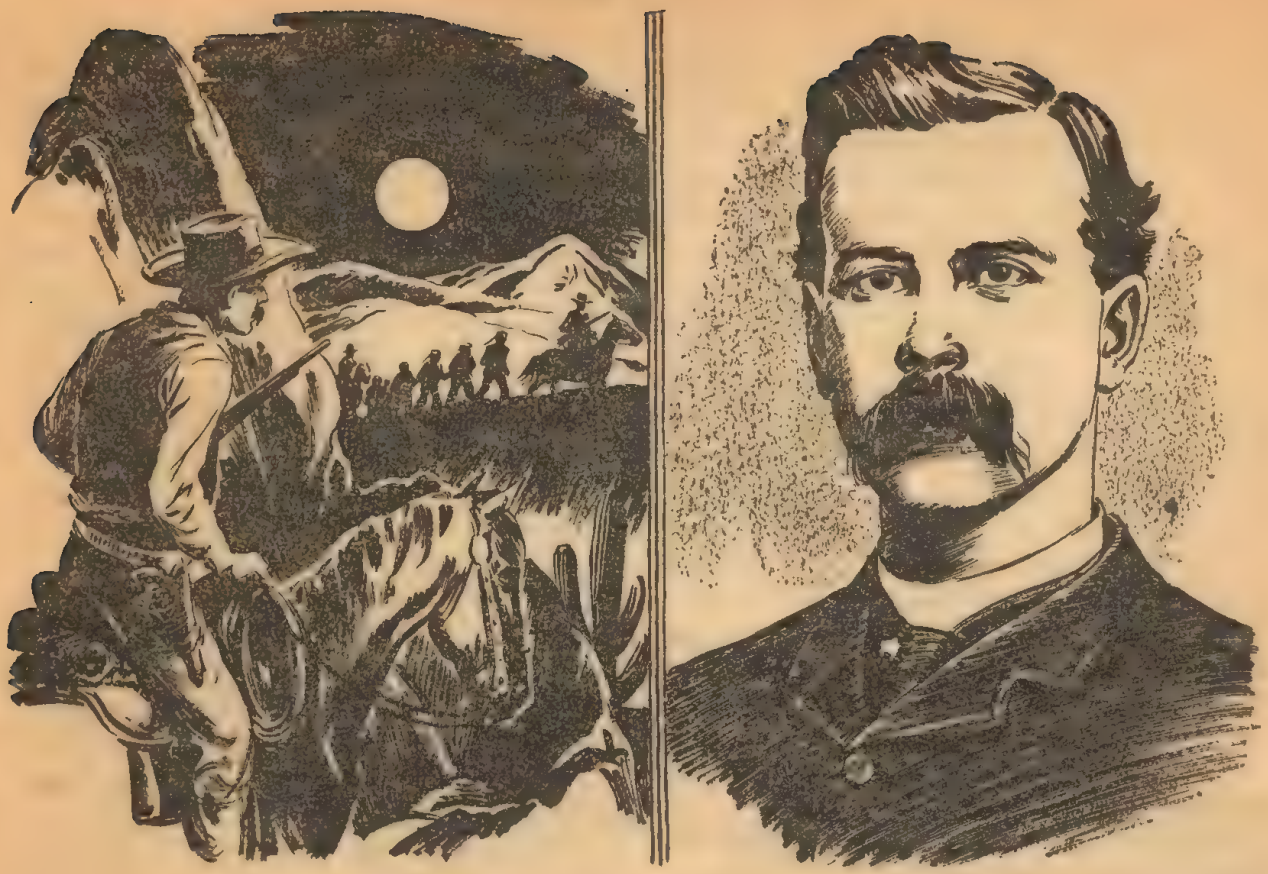
"Well, thanks, Charlie."

"You're plenty welcome," the old man said, slinging his canteen over his shoulder. "I hope it helps you find out what happened to Steve, and to rescue him if he's still alive." He nodded jerkily, said, "So long," and started back toward the slope.

The Rio Kid mounted Saber, rode from the rocks.

He was lost in thought when he joined Celestino Mireles. He was thinking, for one thing, that Jess Harper was employed by Matt Kerrigan. And that Kerrigan claimed to have passed on information about the smugglers to the Immigration Service, information that he had obtained from his teamsters. There was something out of focus, but for the life of him the Rio Kid couldn't tell what it was.

They took the road to Aquila Plaza which, according to Colonel Kosterlitsky's map, was seven miles from the Celestial Mine. It, too, was a torturous road through rugged mountains, on occasion cutting across high ridges where to look down from it was to see over sheer precipices often a thousand feet and more to the rocky bottom of some chasm. It was a road that offered a hundred ambush spots. If Steve Avery had been bushwhacked somewhere between the Celestial Mine and Aquila Plaza, the



JEFFERSON DAVIS MILTON

JEFF DAVIS MILTON was born in Florida in 1861, at the start of the Civil War, and his father was governor of that state. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all soldiers, fighting men, so an adventurous nature was Jeff Milton's heritage. He went to Texas at sixteen, and became a cowhand for the Sawed-Horn Cattle Company. But cowpunching wasn't exciting enough for Jeff's restless nature, and at eighteen he became a Texas Ranger. It was the start of his career as a great lawman.

Later, he went to New Mexico to homestead. His career as a cowman was brief, and soon he was a deputy sheriff of Socorro County and a stock detective for the Central New Mexico Stock Association. Arizona saw him next, and there he was a line rider for the Collector of Customs. He was given the task of halting the flow of smuggled goods across the Border at points where there were no Customs stations.

Milton seemed to attract trouble but few men could handle trouble as capably. Becoming a railroader, he packed a six-shooter and had adventures such as railroaders nowadays never dream of. Later, he was a shotgun messenger for Wells Fargo & Co.

At thirty-two he was Chief of Police in El Paso when it was the toughest town in the West. Milton also served as a deputy U. S. marshal. After a period of prospecting for oil, he was finally appointed Mounted Chinese Inspector for the Immigration Service, by President Theodore Roosevelt. This job was the only one of its kind, and Jeff Milton actually was the first Border Patrolman.

When past seventy, he was retired with an annuity of a hundred dollars a month. In retirement, he lived at Tombstone, Arizona, and in 1947 passed away at Tucson. His ashes were scattered over the desert which he had patrolled for so many years.

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chances were that his body would never be discovered.

They had covered about three-fourths of the distance to Aquila Plaza and were following the road along the rim of a canyon when Mireles suddenly reined in his black gelding, crying, "General, look!"

He was pointing down into the canyon where a large bunch of horsemen—the

Rio Kid counted twenty of them—were riding in single file along a trail that twisted through the boulders and brush of the canyon floor. They were Mexicans. They wore sombreros, and bandoliers of cartridges were across their chests. They were armed with six-shooters and rifles, and were well-mounted.

Why they should be traveling the canyon bottom, the Rio Kid could not guess. Unless— He looked back across the great gorge, saw that it had its beginning in some remote part of the mountains. He glanced at Mireles, and the young Mexican said what was in the Rio Kid's mind.

"Los bandidos! El Bribon!"

One of the riders below glanced toward the canyon's rim and saw the Rio Kid and Mireles. The man reined in, gestured wildly. The entire band halted, stared upward.

The Rio Kid said, "What ails them, anyway?" Mireles shook his head, but after a moment of watching the horsemen far below, he replied, "I think they don't like it that we watch them, General."

"They must be up to something. Maybe starting out on a raid."

The bunch milled about in confusion for perhaps a minute. They seemed to be arguing among themselves. Abruptly four of the band struck out toward the canyon wall. It was steep and treacherous, but by quartering back and forth across its face they managed to climb the slope. One horse made a misstep, however, and fell with its rider. Man and animal tumbled down the slope in a threshing tangle. Below, some of the main group of bandits opened fire at the Rio Kid and his *compadre* with rifles. And though the range was great, they heard the shriek of the slugs.

Mireles said, "General, we better fight or run."

Pryor nodded. "We'll run—but not far."

THEY turned their mounts away from the canyon rim, and plunged into a wild stretch of rocks and brush. This was a comparatively level stretch of country surrounded by jagged peaks. After traveling across it for about a mile the Rio Kid said, "This is far enough, *amigo*."

Mireles looked surprised, then guessing at what his partner planned, smiled faintly and pulled his rifle from its saddle-boot. They hadn't long to wait before the three bandits who had come after them climbed from the canyon. The three cut for sign, saw the tracks leading into the rough country. They came on, pushing their mounts which were already winded from the climb up the canyon wall. Catching sight of their quarry, they began yelling and shooting.

The Rio Kid wheeled Saber about and, with Mireles following him, led the bandits deeper into the *malpais*. Coming upon a cluster of huge boulders, they took cover there, dismounting, and beaded the onrushing riders with their rifles.

"Call to them to throw down their guns, Celestino!"

Mireles called out in Spanish, and the three bandits pulled up short. They stared at the rocks, then rode recklessly to the right in an attempt to flank the position. They were easy targets, but the Rio Kid told Mireles to hold his fire.

"We'll give them one more chance," he said.

The bandits shouted taunts at Mireles when he called on them a second time to give themselves up, then began a wild shooting as they galloped toward the boulders. Mireles uttered a startled cry as a slug tore through his fancy *chaqueta*. And the Rio Kid, a ricocheting bullet narrowly missing him, said, "All right—now!"

They fired at the bloodthirsty trio at point-blank range. One bandit screamed raggedly as a slug tore into him, another tumbled from his running horse without a sound. The third *bandido* gained the rocks, his six-shooter blasting. The Rio Kid dropped his rifle, leaped at the man. He attacked from the left side, catching hold of the bandit's arm. He tore the man from his horse, dropped him heavily

to the ground. Mireles ran forward, kicked the gun from the bandit's hand.

The prisoner, a stocky man with a swarthy, pock-marked face and a thick black mustache, was conscious, but badly dazed. He groaned mournfully.

"This is what you wanted, General—a prisoner to question?"

"Yes. But I didn't want to kill two of them to catch one."

"Do not regret killing those two, General," Mireles said. "They would have killed us without a thought. And gone on to kill more people."

They waited until the prisoner sat up, then tried to question him in English. He stared at the Rio Kid blankly, so Mireles spoke to him in Spanish. He knew the idiom better, though Bob Pryor spoke the language fluently. There was fear in the bandit now, and he talked willingly because along with answering questions he could plead for mercy. He was sure the grim *Americano* and the frowning *caballero* would kill him.

Mireles interpreted the idiom as he drew the man out. "He says that his name is Hernandez Vargas and he is from over in Chihuahua. He was once a *vaquero,* but he had a fight with the *ranchero* he worked for—over a woman. It was his woman, and the *ranchero* stole her from him. He was hungry, so he joined *los bandidos.* But he swears that they are not bandits, General, but revolutionists." Mireles shrugged. "Always these bandit chiefs call themselves revolutionists. It is a way to recruit men. My people take politics seriously. He says that if we will free him, he will return to Chihuahua and never again make trouble."

"Ask him if his chief is *El Bribon.*"

Mireles asked the question, and Vargas nodded vigorously. The bandit talked excitedly for some minutes. Bob Pryor, with his limited understanding of this kind of Spanish, learned little from the outpouring of words. Vargas was both admitting and denying that he had been riding with *El Bribon.*

Mireles said, "He claims that one of *El Bribon's* lieutenants, an hombre named Durango, leads his group of bandits, General. There are several groups that join *El Bribon's* crowd on occasion. They are gathering now, for a raid on Aquila Plaza. *El Bribon* has made a lot of people believe that he is in revolt against the Governor of Sonora. His first move is to take over Aquila Plaza. It is loco. A man planning a revolt does not raid an outlaw town. It is to be a raid for loot, I think."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Ask him about Steve Avery, *amigo.*"

VARGAS shrugged and shook his head when questioned about Avery. When Mireles spoke more curtly, the prisoner claimed that he knew no one named Avery. No, he knew of no *gringo* in *El Bribon's* hands. If there had been a kidnaping, the Durango group, of which Vargas had been a member, knew nothing about it. He did not know the location of *El Bribon's* headquarters. Durango's, yes—*El Bribon's,* no. And there had been no young *Americano* at the Durango hideout.

The Rio Kid frowned, disappointed. He had hoped to learn something important from the man. He asked, "Do you think he's telling the truth, Celestino?"

"*Si.* I am sure of it. He is just a simple man, not clever enough to lie expertly. I am sure he never heard of Steve Avery."

"So we've gained nothing," his *compadre* said. "Except that *El Bribon* is to raid Aquila Plaza." He considered that, then asked, "When is the raid to be?"

Mireles talked to Vargas, then said, "Some time tonight, after dark."

"How many men will *El Bribon* have with him?"

"He says there will be hundreds, General. But that is *bandido* boasting."

"How will the attack be launched?" the Rio Kid inquired. "Ask him if he knows *El Bribon's* plans for raiding the town."

CHAPTER III

Ruckus in Aquila Plaza

MIRELES questioned Vargas some more, but the man knew only that the Durango group was to join the bandit chieftain near Aquila Plaza at sundown. Durango knew the plans but had not revealed them to his men. According to Hernandez Vargas, Durango had merely promised his followers plenty of loot, *tequila* and women if they fought well.

There was much money in the town, Durango had said, for the rustlers, horse thieves, smugglers, bank and train robbers who used Aquila Plaza as a hideout brought much money with them. The merchants and *cantineros* of the town were rich, and—still according to Durango, if Vargas spoke the truth—*El Bribon* would appoint himself *alcalde* and, as was a mayor's right, would tax those rich men for the benefit of the poor.

Mireles turned to his partner with a rueful smile, saying, "It is always so, here in Mexico."

"We'll go to Aquila Plaza, as we planned, Celestino."

"And warn the people there of the raid?"

"Yeah," the Rio Kid said. "Maybe with their help we can capture *El Bribon*. If we're that lucky, we'll force that *bandido* to hand over Steve Avery, whether the young fellow is dead or alive. Let's get out of here, *amigo*, before some more of the Durango crowd get curious and come riding this way."

"What will we do with this hombre, General?"

"We'll take him with us," the Rio Kid said. "If we turn him loose, he'll hightail back to the canyon and sound a warning. We'll have that whole bunch on our trail. I believe Durango sent Vargas and the other two after us because he figured we were from Aquila Plaza and spying on him."

They mounted and rode on across the malpais, Vargas riding between them. They found a cut that permitted them to leave the rough flat without returning to the road along the rim of the canyon. Then, by an around-about way, they continued toward Aquila Plaza. Finally they topped a ridge and saw the town below them.

It was then sundown.

From a distance Aquila Plaza looked no different from any other Mexican town of like size. Except perhaps in one way. There was no church here such as could be seen in ordinary villages. Being the sort of town it was, Aquila Plaza would have no use for a church.

Seen closer, there were notable differences. It was not a community of homes and families. No housewives could be seen, either busy at their chores or at gossip. No children were at noisy play in the streets. What women could be seen were painted, gaudily dressed, flirtatious. The few children were silent, furtive, wise-eyed—homeless waifs, occupied with other pursuits than play. Here was a town, the Rio Kid reflected, where every human was a scheming, greedy creature.

About the main plaza were the native *cantinas* and a couple American-style saloons, gambling dives, dance halls, eating-places, inns, and several stores and shops. The plaza was crowded with Mexicans and Americans, men and women. They were a rowdy, noisy lot. Musicians playing guitars and fiddles occupied the steps of one building, and nearby a performer entertained a small crowd by juggling gourds. Peddlers circulated, hawking shoddy wares. The place had a fiestalike atmosphere that showed how the inhabitants lived from day to day in eager pursuit of pleasure, while plotting some criminal venture against the outside world.

It seemed to Bob Pryor, as he rode

into the town with Mireles and Vargas, that the existence of such a town was a reflection upon the record of Colonel Kosterlitsky and his *Rurales*. But then he realized that Aquila Plaza was so remotely located in wild mountain country that only by moving into it in force could any law enforcement agency deal with its lawless population. And Aquila Plaza would know well in advance of any coming of the *Rurales*. Forewarned, the people could vanish deeper into the mountains and remain hidden until the threat to their freedom was past.

No one seemed to give the Rio Kid and his companions more than a curious glance. Evidently it was taken for granted here that only men who were adventurers on the wrong side of the law would come to Aquila Plaza.

Crossing the *plaza publica*, the three riders came to a plank bridge over a swift-flowing stream that divided the town into two parts. The Rio Kid decided to cross to the south side, to the smaller section, because it appeared quieter and less crowded. Possibly he might find there some who were less intent upon a rowdy good time, and would be serious enough to consider the information he brought.

ONCE across the bridge, they came to a row of ancient adobe buildings. One building was occupied by a Chinese restaurant, and several Chinese were seated outside it, crosslegged on the ground, backs to the adobe wall, smoking clay pipes. Another building was an inn. The Rio Kid reined in and dismounted there.

He said, to Mireles, "I'll see what this place is like, *amigo*."

From outside it seemed a quiet, orderly place. But just as he reached its doorway, a commotion broke out inside. A man cried out in Spanish, a woman screamed. Another man laughed in taunting fashion. The woman screamed again.

The Rio Kid halted in the doorway, but only briefly.

What he witnessed into the room beyond filled him with quick anger. The man who had cried out, a fat Mexican, lay sprawled on the floor. He had been felled by a savage blow, and was bleeding from a wound over his left eye. A burly American stood over the injured Mexican. Laughing. He turned and roughly caught to him the woman who had screamed. She fought him, but he was far too strong for her.

The Rio Kid moved into the room, directly toward the struggling pair.

The burly man saw him, sensed that he meant to interfere. He was drunk, but not so drunk that he did not know what he was doing. Holding the woman with his left hand, he lashed out a blow with his right. He aimed it at the Rio Kid's eyes. Ducking the punch, Bob Pryor knew that he had a fight on his hands. This burly hardcase was a brawler.

Side-stepping the tough's blow, he struck back. He aimed at the man's face, an ugly face with a heavy stubble of rust-red beard. His fist didn't land solidly, merely grazed the bristly cheek, not stunning the hardcase but hurting him enough to make him roar with anger. Striking again, the Rio Kid sent a short jab to the man's paunchy middle. Once more there was a sound of anger, a savage curse. The hardcase still had hold of the woman. He swung her violently by the arm, hurling her against his attacker.

They bumped hard, and the Rio Kid was thrown off-balance. The hardcase gave a jubilant yelp, and rushed. He staggered the Rio Kid with battering body blows, drove him back against a table. A punch to the face knocked Pryor onto the table, upon his back. He brought his feet up, kicked out, catching the bigger man on the chest and reeling him away.

Dropping from the table, the Rio Kid went after the man and lashed him across the face with short but hard jabs. The hardcase ducked one way and another, trying to evade those battering fists. He was cold sober now, and sweat beaded his face while a trickle of blood flowed

from a cut on his upper lip. Fear showed in his eyes. He made a panicky attempt to escape, grabbing a chair and flinging it at the Rio Kid's legs, then running toward the door. The Rio Kid jumped aside, dodging the chair, then tripping his man who fell heavily to the floor.

He waited, panting for breath, but the hardcase did not try to get up. Turning to the girl, who had fallen after being thrown against him, the Rio Kid helped her rise. She was unhurt, but badly shaken. She looked beyond him, her lips parting as though to scream. No sound came from her throat, but the Rio Kid, warned, swung around. He saw the hardcase slowly, groggily rising—with his gun drawn and leveled. The man's eyes gleamed wickedly, murderously.

He cursed the Rio Kid, and thumbed back the hammer of the six-gun.

Then Celestino Mireles was in the doorway, just behind the man. The young Mexican leaped forward, his gun upraised. He clubbed down with it, hard to the back of the tough's head. The blow thudded, sickeningly. The man was knocked to his knees, then he sprawled forward onto his face. This time he was unconscious.

It had been a narrow escape for the Rio Kid, and his voice showed he realized it as he said, "Thanks, *amigo.*"

Mireles was already turning back to the doorway, however. He ran outside. In a moment he returned, a frown on his face.

"He is gone," he said bitterly. "I leave him alone one minute and he is gone." He meant, of course, the captured bandit Vargas. "Shall I hunt for him?"

"No. He's not important."

"Did I kill this hombre?"

The Rio Kid shook his head. "He's just knocked out," he said. "You don't kill his kind that easily."

THE MEXICAN girl was kneeling beside the fat man and helping him sit up. Only now did he realize that she was young and pretty in the dusky-skinned, black-eyed fashion of Mexican senoritas. Celestino Mireles was gazing at her with interest.

"Give her a hand, *amigo,*" the Rio Kid suggested.

Mireles helped the girl get the fat man into a chair. She hurried to another room, returned with a wet cloth, wiped the blood from the man's flabby face. The cut over his eye had already stopped bleeding, but he was badly dazed and slumped limply in the chair. The girl fussed over him a little while, then turned to the Rio Kid and thanked him profusely in Spanish.

"I'm glad I happened by," he said. "My name is Bob Pryor, senorita. My friend is Celestino Mireles. We are strangers in Aquila Plaza."

"I am Maria de Baca," the girl said. "And this is my father, Miguel de Baca. We own this place, and you are very welcome." She spoke careful English now, pleasantly accented. "It is not often that good men come to this town." She glanced at the unconscious hardcase, and her cheeks burned. "Always they are like that one. They think all women of Aquila Plaza are cheap." She gave her dark head a proud toss. "I—I, senores, am not cheap."

The Rio Kid did not know what to say to that. Mireles did, however. He removed his sombrero with a flourish, bowed.

"*Si, senorita,*" he said gallantly. "A man can see that you are a lady."

Maria's eyes flashed. "You laugh at me!"

"No, senorita, I give you my word."

"You think because my father and I live here that we are like all the other people of this place," she said bitterly. "It is not true. We live here because we have always lived here, even before it became a hideout for bad people, when there was just this inn and a few other houses. It is our home. Should we let these others drive us out? Where would we go?"

The Rio Kid smiled. Here was another high-spirited girl like Katherine Eberts.

He said, "My friend is a truthful man. He would not say that you are a lady if he thought otherwise. Who is this man who treated you as though you are not a lady?"

"His name is Harmon—Chris Harmon," Maria said fiercely. "He is a pig. He is worse. Always he comes here and tries to force himself on me. Today he was worse than ever before. I hate him!"

"Harmon?" Pryor said. He remembered that Matt Kerrigan had mentioned that name. "He's a smuggler, isn't he?"

"He is a pig. And yes, he is a smuggler."

"I'd like to talk to your father," the Rio Kid said.

"But he is badly hurt."

Miguel de Baca denied that by pulling himself erect in his chair and saying, "What is it you have to say to me, my friend?" He had got over being dazed, and his eyes, studying the Rio Kid, were shrewd and alert. "It is something important, I think. Does it concern me and my daughter, senor?"

"It concerns this whole town, de Baca," the Rio Kid said somberly. "You know of the *bandido* called *El Bribon?*"

De Baca looked alarmed, and his daughter gasped.

The Rio Kid said, "Mireles and I brought a man named Vargas to Aquila Plaza with us. He escaped while we were fighting Harmon. Vargas is a bandit, a member of a band led by Durango. Vargas told us, when we forced him to talk, that Durango and his men are riding to join *El Bribon.* The *bandidos* plan to raid Aquila Plaza—tonight."

"*Por Dios!*" de Baca cried. "It cannot be!"

He jumped from his chair and hurried to the back room. When he returned, he wore a sombrero and was buckling on a gun-rig. He would have appeared comic, so fat a man making a gunfighter of himself, had he not looked so grim.

"I go to warn the other merchants," he said. "I know what a bandit raid is, my friends. As a boy in Chihuahua, I saw a village sacked by *bandidos.* They killed nearly a hundred people. They carried off the young women. They stole everything that was not fastened down. They even looted the church!" He looked anxiously at his daughter. "Do not fear, *muchacha,*" he told her. "I will come back before the killers arrive."

He hurried from the inn.

The Rio Kid went to the doorway, watched him cross the bridge to the busy side of the town. It was hazy dusk, and doorways and windows on the opposite side of the creek glowed with light. There was not much time for the people of Aquila Plaza to prepare their defenses.

Hearing a groan behind him, Bob Pryor turned back into the room and saw Chris Harmon beginning to regain consciousness. He went and stood over the smuggler, his face rocky.

CHAPTER IX

The Raid

HARMON gained a sitting position, held his head in his hands. There was a sick look on his heavy, bristly face. The Rio Kid told Maria to fetch some whisky or *tequila*. The girl brought *tequila* in a tin-cup, but, still fearing Harmon, would not venture close to him. She handed the cup to the Rio Kid and he gave it to the man sitting on the floor.

Harmon took a drink, shuddered. He looked up with hate-filled eyes. Then he emptied the cup, flung it from him, started to rise. Mireles said, "Stay where you are, hombre."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Yes, you might as well be comfortable—while you talk."

"Talk?" Harmon said suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

"We're looking for a man named Steve Avery."

"So? What's that got to do with me?"

"You're a smuggler of aliens," the Rio Kid said flatly. "Avery was giving information about the smuggling of Chinese to Jeff Milton of the Immigration Service. You smugglers found that out, and decided to do something about it. He disappeared some time ago when he was traveling from the Celestial Mine to Aquila Plaza. He—"

"Yeah," Harmon broke in. "He was captured by bandits."

"So everybody thinks."

"And you don't?"

"I don't know what to think," the Rio Kid said. "That's why I'm asking you. A ransom was paid, but Avery wasn't released. If you smugglers made a deal with the bandits, he'll never be released. Maybe he's already been killed. I've good reason to believe that Avery did disappear because you smugglers wanted to be rid of him."

Harmon scowled. "You're loco, mister," he growled. "I never had any deal with bandits. Neither did any other smugglers that I know of. We have trouble enough dodging those *ladrones.* They make things plenty hot for us, knowing we've got money. They make more trouble for us a lot of times than the law, I'm telling you. I don't know who you are, mister, but you're sure wrong. Sure, I knew Avery was squealing on us. I even talked with Juan Sanchez and Jake Armand about doing something to fix him. But we never got around to it, because we found out that somebody else was doing more damage to our game than Avery ever could."

"Keep talking, Harmon!"

"Why should I?" Chris Harmon said, turning defiant. "You the Law? If you are, you'll never get out of this town alive!"

Mireles stepped around behind him. Harmon had lost his hat during his fight with the Rio Kid, and now Mireles grabbed him by the hair. The young Mexican pressed a knee against the smuggler's back, applying leverage as he stretched the man's neck. He took the knife from his sash, touched the point to Harmon's throat. "You will talk to Captain Pryor, hombre, and tell the truth," Mireles said harshly.

Chris Harmon could not know that this was merely a bluff. Stark terror showed in his eyes, and he gasped, "All right! Take that knife away!"

Mireles released him.

Harmon rubbed his throat, which hurt only in his imagination, and said chokingly, "I'm not lying. This is the truth. I don't know what happened to Avery. I heard that the bandits had him and were holding him for ransom. Maybe Sanchez or Armand made a deal with *El Bribon* to have Avery taken, but I don't think they did. They're as scared of those bandits as I am. Besides, they could have bushwhacked Avery, or hired somebody to do it."

"Where can we find Sanchez and Armand?"

"Sanchez is here in Aquila Plaza. Armand is—busy."

"Busy running some Chinese across the Border, eh?"

Harmon remained silent. Evidently he was not a man to betray his fellow smugglers by so much as a careless word. Pryor motioned to Mireles, and the Mexican showed Harmon his knife, saying, "Friend, I grow impatient with you."

Harmon scrambled crabwise across the floor, trying to get away from the knife. "All right," he said savagely. "I'll tell you. Armand is taking a bunch of Chinese across. He's due to go through Devil's Crossing on the Border tonight or tomorrow night."

"Who is the man who is making more trouble for you than Steve Avery?" the Rio Kid demanded. "Is it Matt Kerrigan?"

"You seem to know a hell of a lot, mister."

"I need to know more, if I'm to find Steve Avery. What about Kerrigan?"

"Sure. He's the one who's making things tough for us."

"And you have made a marked man

of him—you, Sanchez and Armand."

"Not me. Not Sanchez, either. Armand."

"Jake Armand sent a man to kill Kerrigan," the Rio Kid said. "A man named Nixon. Kerrigan has been tipping off the Immigration Service about the activities of you and the other smugglers. He obtained information from his teamsters, and they picked it up when hauling freight down here to Sonora. One of them, Harper, tried to kill Steve Avery not long before—"

HE WAS interrupted by a sudden commotion from the plaza.

Voices cried out, cursed, screamed. There was a great drumming of hoofs, the thunder of many horses. Guns began to blast.

El Bribon and his bandits had started their raid on Aquila Plaza!

The Rio Kid leaped to the door. It was nearly dark now, and the riders swarming into the town were just so many shadowy figures. Gun flashes were lurid in the gloom. Townspeople were in wild flight, milling in confusion about the *plaza publica*. It was apparent that Miguel de Baca had failed to convince them of the danger. He'd not had time enough. *El Bribon* had struck too soon. Screams continued to ring out above the gunshots and the wild yelling of the raiders.

The Rio Kid looked back at Mireles.

"We'll fort up in here, *amigo*," he said grimly. "Give Harmon his gun if the inn is attacked. I'll be back shortly."

Mireles came to close the door, and his *compadre* ran out to the horses. The Rio Kid led Saber and Celestino's black gelding around behind the inn, into a walled yard. Returning to the street, carrying his carbine, he ran toward the bridge over the creek. Some men on foot were slowly retreating across the span, shooting at the horde of riders at the far side of the plaza.

There were a dozen of the defenders, all Mexicans, and de Baca was among them. A half dozen horsemen charged the bridge, but the fire from the townsmen was point blank. Two of the riders spilled from their saddles, a third was wounded and swerved away. The remaining three gained the north end of the bridge, but there two more were cut down. The last of the six turned tail and fled.

The Rio Kid grabbed de Baca by the arm as the fat man and his companions came off the bridge, saying, "We'll make a stand here, *amigo*. If we can keep them from crossing the bridge, we'll have a chance of holding them off." An idea came. "Look! Have you any coal oil at your inn?"

De Baca nodded vigorously. "*Si!*" he said. "Much oil. We will burn the bridge, no?" He hurried away with two of his crowd.

The Rio Kid gave the other nine townsmen orders to hold their fire. It was foolhardy to waste ammunition. He deployed them along the creek bank, behind rocks for cover, told them not to do any shooting unless some of the raiders tried to cross the bridge.

At the moment the raiders were busy across the plaza and in the narrow streets in the north side of the town. Some of the townsmen over there were putting up a fight, shooting from doorways and windows. De Baca and his two companions returned shortly, each carrying a large can of coal oil. The Rio Kid covered them with his carbine while they poured the oil onto the plank flooring of the bridge. When the cans were empty, he ordered them back and, midway across the hundred-foot span, lighted a match to touch off the oil.

It burned slowly for a minute or two, then a gust of wind fanned the flames. The fire flared up, began to spread rapidly. Backing away, the Rio Kid saw that another small bunch of horsemen was galloping toward the bridge. The flames were not yet so high as to deny them a crossing, so the Rio Kid swung his carbine to his shoulder and opened fire.

They came on, shooting wildly. He hit one rider just as they reached the

far side of the bridge, and the whole bunched reined in and milled about in sudden confusion. The plank flooring was beginning to burn, the flames roaring and crackling. Smoke billowed up, densely black. The Rio Kid fired a couple more shots, but he could no longer see his targets.

He turned, left the bridge, joined de Baca and the men deployed along the creek bank. They were shooting methodically, careful with their ammunition. The now raging blaze spread a ruddy glare over the entire town.

More and more bandits gathered in the vicinity of the creek and the burning bridge, most of them now dismounted. Vargas had said that *El Bribon* would have hundreds of men with him. He had been exaggerating, as the Rio Kid had known, but it seemed that there were at least a hundred bandits swarming through Aquila Plaza.

PERHAPS a third of them took cover along the north side of the creek and sniped at the Rio Kid and his handful of men. They targeted two of the townsmen on the south bank, killing both. And the Rio Kid realized that his position was too exposed, even though the bandits still were not bold enough to attempt to descend the steep bank and ford the swift stream.

He called to de Baca, "We'd better fort up in your inn!"

The fat man nodded. *"Si!* Or they will kill us all!"

They made a fighting retreat, with the Rio Kid and de Baca the last to reach the doorway of the ancient adobe building. Mireles was there, firing his six-gun. He waited until his partner was inside, then closed and barred the heavy, iron-banded door. The inn was a likely place in which to fort up. Its walls were thick, and the few windows were hardly larger than loop-holes. With the dozen men now there, it could be held against attack, and only a siege could force them to give in.

Chris Harmon was at one of the windows, with a rifle he had found somewhere in the inn. He called, "Hey, Rio Kid! Come here a minute!"

Pryor joined him at the narrow window. "So you know me," he said.

Harmon gave him a twisted grin. "I got to thinking about you," he replied. "Figured you for a lawman at first, but then I remembered that the Rio Kid's real name was Pryor. Shed your uniform, did you?"

"Only for this visit to Mexico."

"Some visit. A real, quiet holiday for you, Rio Kid."

"I didn't expect it to be quiet," Pryor said, chuckling. "But I didn't count on it being this noisy, either. And I didn't expect to be fighting side by side with smugglers and outlaws. What did you want, Harmon?"

"Take a look," Harmon said. *"El Bribon,* himself. The big hombre on the white horse."

The Rio Kid gazed from the window. The bridge was now ablaze from end to end, and every corner of the wide plaza was lighted by the ruddy glare. The north side of the town was swarming with *bandidos,* shooting into some buildings, and entering others from which there no longer came any gunfire.

The Rio Kid saw the white horse; it attracted the eye like a banner. Its rider had dismounted and was now entering a building on the far side of the plaza. He paused in the entrance, turned, watched the savage fighting for a moment like the commanding officer of an army engaged in a winning battle. The distance was too great for the Rio Kid to make out the man's features, but he was sure that *El Bribon* was smiling.

The bandit leader was a big man. Big at least by Mexican standards. He was about six feet tall, and thick of body. He was dressed in black from sombrero to boots, his somber costume relieved only by a crimson sash and some gold embroidery that was worked into his *chaqueta.* After his satisfied glance around the plaza, which was now littered with dead and wounded, *El Bribon* went in-

side the building. He was followed by two lieutenants. Two *bandidos* stood guard by the entrance, and another held the big white horse.

The Rio Kid glanced at Chris Harmon. "What building is that?"

"El Casino," the smuggler replied. "It's the biggest saloon and gambling dive in town. The bandits cleaned it out in a hurry. Looks like *El Bribon* wants it for his headquarters."

"You know the place?"

"Some. Why?"

"I've got an idea," tht Rio Kid said. "Is there a back way into it?"

Harmon nodded. "Sure," he said, and eyed his questioner with surprise. "You don't aim to go over there and—"

The devil-may-care look that was characteristic of the Rio Kid was in his blue eyes. "It's worth a try," he said. *"El Bribon* has only two men inside with him, and de won't be expecting any of us to be loco enough to try such a thing." He smiled wryly. "You're volunteering to lead Mireles and me around to the back door of *El Casino."*

"Now, hold on, Rio Kid," Harmon protested. "I ain't aiming to commit suicide!"

The Rio Kid ignored the protest.

He was already calling Mireles and Miguel de Baca to him.

DE BACA said that it was possible. If a man had luck he might circle around the town and reach the rear of the *cantina.* But as for taking *El Bribon* by surprise —the fat man shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"* he said.

One of the other Mexicans had come forward to listen. It was obvious that he was no merchant like de Baca and most of the other Mexicans gathered in the inn. He was of medium stature, wiry of build, and there was a definite Indian cast to his dusky face. The man said, "It's worth a try, Senor Pryor." He spoke good Border *Americana.* "I'll throw in with you."

"Good," Pryor said, eyeing the man wonderingly. "Let's get started."

De Baca escorted them to the rear of the inn, cautiously looked out the rear door of the building, then opened it wide and murmured, *"Vaya con Dios, amigos."* The Rio Kid led the way, holding his carbine ready. It was dark here behind the row of old buildings among which the inn stood, and beyond was nothing but a strip of brush-grown land extending to the nearby mountain slope.

When the others joined him, the Rio Kid said, "Take over, Harmon."

The smuggler had no heart for the venture, and grumbled as he set out. Mireles followed close behind him, and the Rio Kid moved along through the darkness with the Indian-faced stranger.

Pryor said, in a whisper, "You are a *Rurale,* friend?"

"Si. How did you know, senor?"

"A hunch, partly. Because you volunteered to go along on this venture. Too, Colonel Kosterlitsky told me that he aimed to send a couple of *Rurales* to Aquila Plaza to keep an eye on me. Did he send you alone, friend?"

"Esteban is my name," the *Rurale* said. "No, he sent another man with me. He rode out when Senor de Baca told that *El Bribon* would raid the town. He went to tell *El Coronel."*

"You think Colonel Kosterlitsky will come here?"

Esteban shrugged. "Who knows," he said. "He may be busy elsewhere."

CHAPTER X

Prisoner of War

FALLING silent then, the men making the sortie crouched low to the ground, once away from the row of adobes. If any of the bandits were near, it was almost certain that, in the glare from the fire, the four would be seen.

They went downstream along the creek, then forded its swirling water at a point perhaps a hundred yards from the nearest building. Occasionally Chris Harmon hesitated, but Mireles goaded him on by pressing the muzzle of his gun against the smuggler's back.

Moving like furtive shadows, they gained an adobe barn on the north side of the town. They were at the rear of a jumble of adobes buildings large and small, and Harmon pointed to a dark alleyway.

"That'll take us to *El Casino,*" he whispered shakily.

The glare was gradually fading, and before they reached the alley there was a distant explosive cracking and rumbling. The burning bridge had given way, crashed into the creek. The ruddy glare disappeared, and the ensuing darkness was inky. Shooting continued, but it was farther south.

The Rio Kid knew that the bandits were now concentrating on de Baca's inn, but he did not worry too much about the people there. The inn was a stronghold that wouldn't be easily taken.

They hurried along the alley, meeting some fleeing townspeople who ran past them in wild panic. Then abruptly Harmon halted in the deep shadows of a wall. He pointed toward the rear of one of the larger buildings. There was a door—and a *bandido* with a rifle standing guard by it.

The sentry was not too alert. Puffing on a cigarette, he watched one of the town's waifs slinking along through the darkness. The boy seemed unafraid. He was carrying something on his shoulder. Evidently he had been doing some looting on his own.

The Rio Kid motioned to Mireles, and the young Mexican, nodding that he understood, moved stealthily forward. The sentry turned to watch the boy. He slowly raised his rifle, intending to shoot the waif down. Mireles moved faster. He lunged, jumped the bandit from behind. There was a glint of knife-steel, a faint outcry, then the sentry crumpled to the ground. His rifle fell unfired, and the boy disappeared without knowing how close he had been to dying. Mireles bent over the fallen bandit, wiping his knife on the dead man's clothing.

The Rio Kid said, "Harmon, you guard this door while we're inside."

He could see the smuggler's relief. Chris Harmon feared to go into the building.

The door was unlocked. Mireles had it open by the time the Rio Kid and Esteban joined him. They entered a storeroom stacked with cases and barrels and smelling of foods and liquor. Crossing it, the Rio Kid opened a door that looked out into a hall. Lamplight glowed at the far end of the hall, and there was a rumble of distant voices. Talk and laughter.

Moving into the corridor, the Rio Kid saw numerous doors along it but the rooms beyond them were dark and silent. His companions moved quietly along behind him. At the end of the hall, they looked into the lamplighted main room of *El Casino.*

Three men were there, drinking at the bar. One, an American renegade, was behind the bar and serving the drinks in place of the bartenders who had fled or been killed. There were several bodies across the room, sprawled beneath a window that looked out onto the plaza. The window panes had been shot out. The door to the plaza was closed.

El Bribon's desire for privacy was a break for the three intruders. For the sentries outside would not know until too late of what was happening in the *cantina.*

El Bribon was drinking from a beer stein, and if it held *tequila,* he had a great capacity for hard liquor. He was a burly man of about fifty, heavy and rather flabby of face. He had one of those big black mustaches that seemed to be the mark of a *bandido* chief. He was an imposing figure, however, due to his handsome black *caballero* cos-

tume. The man at the front of the bar with him was young, slender, handsome. He looked more like an upper-class Mexican than a peon. He was more dainty in his drinking, sipping what looked like wine from a small glass.

The Rio Kid glanced at his companions. They were grim, ready.

He said, not bothering to keep his voice down, "I want *El Bribon* alive."

With that, he moved into the room.

THE MAN behind the bar saw the danger at once. A startled look spread over his tough face. He had a bottle in one hand and a glass in another. He dropped them both, his hands going to his guns. He yelled, "Watch it —watch it!"

El Bribon and the young Mexican swung around.

The bandit chieftain swore in Spanish, grabbed for his gun. There was a look of shock about him, but no fear. His gun began blasting as it cleared its holster. The *cantina* seemed to rock with the racket of the shots.

El Bribon fired three wild shots before the Rio Kid squeezed the trigger of his carbine. Taking time to aim, the Rio Kid had run the risk of being shot down. But he had counted on the bandit chieftain being too startled and too full of *tequila* to shoot straight. His own careful shot caught *El Bribon* in the right arm, knocking the six-gun from his hand and throwing him against the bar.

Celestino Mireles and the *Rurales* had not been idle. Their guns had joined in the fight even before the Rio Kid's weapon's blasted. And both the young bandit and the renegade were down, one on each side of the bar.

"The door, *amigos!*" the Rio Kid shouted. "Watch the door!"

He ran across to *El Bribon* who was dazed, perhaps as much by this turn in his fortunes as because of his wound, and was unable to offer any resistance.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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Grabbing his uninjured arm, Pryor jerked him away from the bar and shoved him toward the hall. *El Bribon* went lurching across the room. The Rio Kid followed closely, jabbing him in the back with his carbine. Behind them the door burst open and men rushed in from the plaza. Mireles shouted a warning, fired a shot at the big ceiling lamp. The room was plunged into thick blackness. More shots crashed. Voices shouted and cursed in Spanish.

The Rio Kid saw nothing of Chris Harmon when he shoved *El Bribon* through the rear door into the alley. The smuggler had lost his nerve completely and made his getaway. Forcing his prisoner ahead of him, the Rio Kid moved through the dark alley. Mireles caught up with them at its far end.

"We were lucky, General," he said. "Luckier than I expected."

"Yes. But where's Esteban? He didn't—"

"No, General." Mireles said. "He is not hurt. He stays behind to make sure we are not followed. He is a brave hombre, that one." He peered at the bandit who was swaying like a drunk. "He is not so dangerous now, this *bandido*. Where do we go now, General?"

"To the inn," Pryor told him. "It's as safe a place as any. Besides, the people there will need help."

They went on, moving warily, making sure that none of *El Bribon's* men were nearby. Reaching the creek, they descended its steep north bank, forded the stream, climbed the south bank. They looked back and saw the *Rurale*, an elusive shadow, not far behind.

Upstream they saw gun-flashes. The bandits were ranged about the plaza and firing steadily at the inn. It was a foolish sort of attack, but then, as the Rio Kid realized, the bandits were not trained soldiers. It would take them quite a while to figure out that they would have to cross the creek and assault the inn to get at the men defending that stout-walled building.

Circling out across the brush-grown flat, the two *compadres* and their sullen prisoner came finally to the rear of the row of old buildings. Miguel de Baca was on guard at the rear door of the inn.

"Senor Pryor?" he called warily. "Is that you?"

"Yes, friend," the Rio Kid replied. "And we have a visitor."

"A visitor? Who, senor?"

The Rio Kid chuckled. "He calls himself *El Bribon*," he said cheerfully.

De Baca's inn was no longer under fire. The *bandidos* had drawn off to search for their leader, a confused bunch of men. They did their searching in the north side of Aquila Plaza, so shaken by the capture of *El Bribon* that they could not imagine that some of the inn's defenders had dared raid *El Casino* and carry off their chief. They were simple men, lost and bewildered when having no one to give them orders.

El Bribon was taken into one of the inn's bedrooms, and de Baca cleansed and bandaged his wound. It was not a serious wound; the slug had merely ploughed a deep gash in the forearm, causing a loss of blood. The bandit was suffering more from shock than from anything else.

HE SAT dejectedly in his chair, trembling under the chill gazes of his captors. He had gambled for high stakes. The looting of Aquila Plaza would have made him rich, and his name would have become known from one end of Mexico to the other, and even across the Border in the United States. But he had lost the play and now, unless some miracle saved him, 'dobe-walling would be his reward. And the firing squad was the end of all things.

The Rio Kid could guess at what was running through the man's mind. He could understand the bandit's fear. But, knowing *El Bribon* as cruel and crafty, he let himself feel no pity. He said flatly, "There's only one reason why you're still alive, hombre. I want you to talk."

"Talk, senor?" said *El Bribon*, in

heavily accented English. "What can I talk about?"

"About an American named Steve Avery."

"Ah?"

"You know the name?"

"It will do me no good to deny that, senor."

"What happened to him?"

El Bribon looked surprised. "I do not understand that, senor," he said. "He was captured by my men, and I held him for ransom. It was paid and he was freed. We released him at the same spot where he was captured, on the road outside Aquila Plaza. What happened to him after that I do not know."

The Rio Kid studied him a moment, and was convinced that he was telling the truth. He said, "Avery was on his way to Arizona when your men captured him. He would have gone on after you released him, but he didn't get across the Border. So something did happen to him. There were two demands for ransom. Two ransom notes. The second was received after Avery's father paid the first ten thousand dollars you demanded."

"No," said *El Bribon,* looking bewildered, "there was but one ransom demand. It was met. I kept five thousand dollars, gave two thousand to my *segundo,* and divided the remaining three thousand among my men. That was all."

"You personally released Avery?"

"I sent him away from my stronghold in the mountains. Some of my men returned him to the place where he had been captured. My *segundo* led them."

"Who is this *segundo* of yours?"

"A gringo named Al Purcell."

"He wrote the first ransom note for you?"

"*Si.* I do not read or write."

The Rio Kid frowned. "I'm beginning to savvy," he said. "Purcell crossed you up. He didn't release Avery. He either killed him or hid him away somewhere. Then he wrote a second ransom note and sent it to Avery's father. He demanded a second ten thousand dollars, which he meant to keep for himself. Your *segundo* is a pretty smart fellow, *El Bribon.*"

The bandit shrugged. "So it seems," he said drily. "He was smart enough to think farther ahead than *El Bribon.* And to betray me. He knew that it was my rule to release a prisoner upon the payment of ransom." He was silent a moment, scowling darkly. "Senor, believe this," he continued. "Purcell came to me and said that it would be profitable to hold Senor Avery for ransom. He learned about Avery from another gringo named Harper."

"Harper? A teamster for the Valido Freighting Company?"

"*Si.* It seems that Harper wanted Avery done away with. It may be as you say that Purcell killed him."

"There was a renegade American with you tonight," the Rio Kid said. "He was Al Purcell?"

"*Si.* He is the one who can tell you about Senor Avery, I think."

"No."

"No?"

"He's dead," Bob Pryor said bitterly. . . .

It was a long night for the people forted up in Miguel de Baca's old inn. The Rio Kid left Esteban, the *Rurale,* to guard *El Bribon.* He went to the main room with Mireles and de Baca. The other Mexicans were still on guard at the windows, but the building was no longer threatened. An occasional shot was fired at its door from across the creek, but the bandit crowd was no longer interested in seizing the inn.

They still did not suspect that *El Bribon* was a prisoner there.

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CHAPTER XI

Devil's Crossing

SMILINGLY Maria de Baca, who was kept busy serving food and coffee to the defenders, brought the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles heaping plates of peppery Mexican food, and more coffee than they could possibly drink. It was obvious that nothing so exciting as having two handsome men who were not outlaws at the inn had ever happened before for Maria.

But it was apparent, too, that the girl could not decide which man attracted her more. Which was good, the Rio Kid reflected. For it would have been unfortunate for her, to have fallen genuinely in love with either of them. Both men, Mireles no less than the Rio Kid, had adventure for a mistress. Neither would permit himself to become romantically entangled with any woman.

Pryor sat lost in though after he had eaten, and finally Mireles asked, "What will we do now to find Steve Avery, General?"

"I don't know, Celestino. I'm up a tree."

"It will be hard to face Senorita Eberts, no?"

The Rio Kid nodded. It would be hard to face the girl and tell her that he had found no trace of her fiancé. He said, "We've never failed before, *amigo*. But this time we were licked before we started. I was sure all along that Avery was alive, but now—Well, if Harper got Al Purcell to kill Avery, we're not likely even to find his body."

"This Harper. I don't savvy that hombre."

"I've got a notion or two about him."

"Si?"

The Rio Kid spoke slowly, as though thinking aloud. "Steve Avery was sending Jeff Milton information about the smugglers," he said. "Chris Harmon knew that. So did Juan Sanchez and Jake Armand. But they were less concerned about Avery than they were about Matt Kerrigan who was also supplying the Immigration Service with information. Armand sent a man to try to kill Kerrigan. Kerrigan claimed he obtained his information from his teamsters, yet one of his teamsters, Harper, had Avery done away with. My notion is that Harper gave Kerrigan tips on Harmon, Sanchez and Armand. He wanted their smuggling activities hamstrung. Why? Because he himself is somehow involved in smuggling Chinese."

Mireles looked puzzled. "A teamster, General? But how?"

"Harper hauls freight to the mines here in Sonora. But his wagon is empty on the return trip. It could be that it's not so empty as it should be. Maybe he has Chinese aboard it, Chinese he picks up at the Celestial Mine." His bronzed face turned grim. "If Avery was killed, we'll at least avenge him, Celestino. We're going after Jess Harper!"

"Si," Mireles murmured. "If we get out of this town alive."

The search for *El Bribon* finally petered out, and many of the bandits, becoming frightened, slipped out of Aquila Plaza. A large number remained, however. Drunk and vicious, they continued to terrorize the town. Then in the gray dawn there was a thunderous drumming of hoofs, and a new band of horsemen swept into the place.

Los Rurales!

The fighting that had occurred earlier was as nothing to that which now broke out, for the *Rurales* lived up to their savage reputation. They gave no quarter and, unlike the *bandidos*, they were trained and disciplined fighting men. Colonel Kosterlitsky rode at their head, his Cossack saber in his hand.

It was over before daylight, the *Rurales* in control of the outlaw town and guarding every exit from the place.

The Rio Kid and Mireles got their horses and forded the creek. They were covered by *Rurale* guns as they rode into the center of the bloody plaza to meet Kosterlitsky. *El Coronel* had won a victory. He had bagged a fine catch, not only of bandits but of numerous outlaws who had been holed up in Aquila Plaza. Chris Harmon was among the prisoners. But Kosterlitsky was in a bad humor, a scowl on his face.

"The one man I hoped to catch got away, Captain," he said bitterly. "*El Bribon* escaped, to round up another band and make more trouble."

"You're mistaken, Colonel," Bob Pryor told him. "We've got *El Bribon* a prisoner. We've had him since early last night. He's at the inn on the other side of the creek, guarded by your man Esteban." He watched Kosterlitsky's face brighten. "My luck isn't so good," he added. "I still haven't found Steve Avery."

THE RUSSIAN smiled. "I can return the favor, Captain," he said. "I have word of Avery. He turned up at a *rancho* north of the Sierra Aquilas yesterday afternoon. He begged a meal, and wanted a horse. The *rancheros* wouldn't give him a mount, thinking he was an outlaw. When Avery went on, the *ranchero* rode to Santa Rosita to tell the *Rurales* about him. Avery is making his way toward the Border. He mentioned Devil's Crossing, and told the *ranchero* that he was going by that back trail because he feared that he would be killed by some enemies if he kept to the Valido road."

The Rio Kid frowned, remembering that Chris Harmon had said that Jake Armand was running some Chinese across the line through Devil's Crossing. If Avery should meet up with Armand, he might well be killed by the smuggler.

"How do I get to Devil's Crossing, Colonel?"

"I will give you a man to guide you there."

"Give me Esteban," Pryor said. "He's one of the best."

Kosterlitsky nodded. "I owe you that much," he said, and barked an order to one of his officers. . . .

It was wild desert country, and far west of the Valido road. They had been traveling hard all day, and not since noon, when they stopped in a village for a meal, had they seen any habitation. Now, at sundown, they halted to rest their mounts. And Esteban said, "You won't need a guide from here on, my friend. Devil's Crossing is just ahead."

He pointed to some towering rocks, golden in the sunset, explaining that an entrance to a narrow canyon was just beyond the rocks and that the canyon, extending on into Arizona Territory, was the route followed by the smugglers and others wishing to cross the Border without encountering law officers or enemies.

Mireles was not with the Rio Kid and the *Rurale*. He had been sent to Santa Rosita where Katherine Eberts still waited. The young Mexican was to tell her that her fiancé was on his way to Valido. He was to escort her back to that town for a reunion with Steve. A reunion dependent upon Avery's getting safely through Devil's Crossing without encountering the smuggler Armand or the men he feared would kill him.

The Rio Kid and Esteban shook hands, wished each other well, parted.

Riding north alone, Bob Pryor watched the sun sink behind the western rim of the desert, and a purplish dusk gather. It was nearly full dark when he descended into the canyon, but the moon rose, bright in a clear sky, and lighted his way. The canyon was as shallow as it was narrow. It twisted one way and another in a serpentine winding, yet always led north. He had no way of knowing where Mexico ended and Arizona began, but after perhaps an hour he became aware that someone was traveling ahead of him.

He reined in, feeling a tremor run through Saber's body. The dun had

traveled far that day, but now all weariness was forgotten. Snorting excitedly, Saber acted as though he wanted to run. He pawed the ground with his right fore-hoof. Then the Rio Kid, too, heard the sound—a sound he'd heard one night not long before, a metallic clanking of chains.

Armand was not far ahead, with another bunch of shackled and chained Chinese. Peering through the canyon, Pryor shortly saw shadowy figures crossing a patch of moonlight. Ten of the figures were afoot, walking in step and in single file. A rider traveled ahead of them, two more horsemen followed them. Armand and two helpers. Suddenly the front rider reined in and swung up his right hand up in signal. The other two riders rode up to the Chinese, halting them.

For an instant the Rio Kid thought that the riders had somehow become aware of him, then he saw the lead rider draw his gun and gig his horse forward. Farther ahead, perhaps a hundred yards beyond the group, was another figure. A man afoot and moving clumsily—lurching, staggering, like a person who has been traveling too long on foot on the desert.

Pryor guessed—Steve Avery!

He reached for his carbine and without the slightest hesitation fired a shot into the air to distract the rider heading toward Avery. The ruse didn't work, however. The horseman fired a shot at the man afoot. The Rio Kid uttered a cry of dismay as he saw Avery drop to the ground. Then he let Saber run, and ahead of him guns flashed. He heard the whine of slugs, too close for comfort. If he continued his reckless charge, he would be targeted. He reined Saber in, dropped from saddle, dived for the scant cover of a small boulder.

A SLUG struck the rock, ricocheted, screaming.

The smugglers also dismounted and sought cover, and continued to snipe at him. Armand was not going to abandon his Chinese this time without a fight. He was shouting orders at his two men in a savage voice. There seemed to be desperation in the man. And the Rio Kid supposed that man could no longer afford to fail in a smuggling attempt. Too many failures, and a smuggler would have such a bad reputation that he would no longer be trusted by the people who put up money to have Chinese run across the Border.

They played it cagey. One man sniped at the Rio Kid's position, and when the fire was returned, the other two cut loose with a flurry of shots. They had trouble getting their shots low enough behind the boulder, but they did have him pinned down. The Rio Kid could not move ahead or retreat without risking quick death.

It had become a duel, with the odds against him. And his only chance of staying alive was to cut down the odds before the night was gone and daylight permitted them to see a way to get at him. He realized with a growing uneasiness that he might not be able to last that long, for a chance shot could easily find him—probably would find him if the heavy shooting continued.

He was always reluctant to kill, yet he knew that if there was ever a man deserving to have his life cut short, it was Jake Armand. It was not so much Armand's breaking the Chinese Exclusion Laws that caused the Rio Kid to hate him. Rather, it was the smuggler's cruelty in disposing of aliens to die in the desert, if he was cornered. The Rio Kid had not forgotten the seven crazed Chinese he and Mireles had encountered that night when on their way to Valido.

Too, there was the shooting of Steve Avery minutes ago that needed to be avenged. So it was partly to stay alive and partly to end Jake Armand's vicious career that the Rio Kid now fought the uneven duel under a smugglers' moon. And he willed himself to kill Jake Armand before he died there, if die he must.

He fired a dozen ineffectual rounds

within the space of a half hour, and each shot drew a half dozen slugs from smuggler guns. The stalemate would have cracked the nerve of a less strong-willed man, but the Rio Kid remained calm. Finally it was Armand's patience that gave out.

The smuggler bellowed an oath, and yelled, "Get him, you fools! Smoke him out of there!"

He rose from behind the rock he used for cover and, crouching low, ran forward to flank the Rio Kid's position. His six-gun blazed once, twice and a third time as he ran, then the Rio Kid's carbine cracked. Armand pitched to the ground, crying out.

He was not seriously hit, for he went on, crawling. The other two rushed at Pryor's cover, shooting as they came. He swung his carbine toward the nearer man, then a gun from farther on through the canyon blasted. The smuggler crumpled to the ground without a sound. The other man faltered, then he also went down under the gun from upcanyon.

Armand cursed like a madman, and fired again at the Rio Kid.

The smuggler had no cover now, and he lay in a patch of moonlight. His face was wild with rage as he took more careful aim for another shot. But he was an instant too slow in squeezing his trigger. The Rio Kid drove a slug into him, and Armand, his final shot also wild, went limp.

A voice called, "Milton here! Who're you, hombre?"

He came from a brush thicket when the Rio Kid identified himself. He was leading his horse. He circled about the frightened Chinese who lay on the ground uttering animal-like sounds. The famous lawman and the equally famous altruistic adventurer shook hands.

Milton asked, "How do you happen to be here, Captain?"

"I was trailing Steve Avery," Pryor replied. "And ran into Armand. I was seconds too late. Armand shot Avery. Did you see him?"

"Yeah. He's lying back there, dead or unconscious."

They turned upcanyon, Pryor whistling for Saber, and the dun following them. He asked, "How did you happen to show up here, Jeff?"

"A tip again," the Chinese Inspector said drily. "This time from Matt Kerrigan. It beats me how Kerrigan always knows when Armand is running a bunch of Chinese across the Border. He claims this teamsters—"

"I've got an idea about that," the Rio Kid cut in, and his voice was grim.

THEY reached the spot where Steve Avery lay. The young mining engineer was on his back, his face gray with pallor and also haggard from the suffering he had undergone since his capture by the bandits. The Rio Kid knelt by him, made a hasty examination, and said:

"He's alive. A bullet wound in his right shoulder. Not too bad a wound."

Jeff Milton treated Steve Avery's wound, by the flickering glow of a fire that Bob Pryor built. Among the people of the desert—Mexicans, Indians, and even many Americans—Milton was almost as famous as a doctor as a lawman. Unschooled though he was, he had great skill as a physician and a surgeon. Many natives called him *El Medico*. He carried with him a kit of drugs and a few simple surgical instruments.

Finally Steve Avery lay on a blanket, conscious, if weak. He managed to smile when Milton told, "You'll live to marry that pretty girl that's waiting for you, hombre." Then Milton settled back to smoke his pipe, saying, "Now, Captain, what's your idea about how Kerrigan knows so much about Jake Armand's movements?"

The Rio Kid told him of his suspicions of Jess Harper, Kerrigan's teamster.

"Harper," he said, "must be involved in the smuggling. So to hurt his competition—Armand and the others—he gives Kerrigan information about their

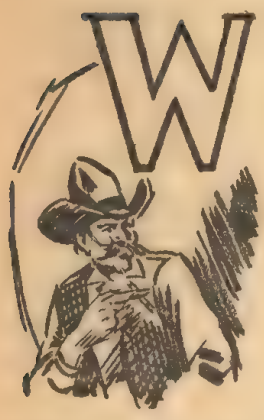
movements. And Kerrigan unwittingly helps him by passing the information on to you."

"Could be," Milton said. "But how does he get a wagonload of Chinese over the Border without the Customs Inspectors catching on?"

"I can tell you," Steve Avery said huskily. "Harper always sees to it that his string of freight wagons crosses the Border late at night, on the way back to Valido. Before he reaches the Border town of Yermo, Harper takes his rig out of the string and swings about a mile off the road. The other wagons go on through the Customs, and nobody ever notices that there were, say, six rigs in the string on the way to Mexico and that only five are coming back."

CHAPTER XII

Law and The Rio Kid



WEAK though he was Avery insisted on talking.

"Harper gets to Valido while it's still dark," he told Milton and the Rio Kid, "and nobody is awake in town at maybe three or four o'clock in the morning. He pulls into the Valido Freighting Company's wagon yard and sneaks the Chinese into the barn. The next night they're moved on, away from Valido."

"And Kerrigan doesn't suspect Harper?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Kerrigan is in on it."

"What!" Pryor exclaimed. "You mean to say—"

Jeff Milton, too, looked surprised.

Avery said bitterly, "Kerrigan planned it. He made a deal with the owners of the Celestial Mine, and was scheming to control all the smuggling along the Border. He made things tough for the other smugglers like Jake Armand. I learned plenty about Armand and some others while I was working at the Celestial. That was a stopover for the Chinese. They all have to work there for a number of weeks for the bigwig Chinese in San Francisco who pay the smugglers. Ben Maury, the mine superintendent, was in on it. He spilled it to me one night when he was drunk, about Matt Kerrigan. He remembered it when he sobered up, and he put Harper up to killing me. Harper tried his best, but I managed to stay alive. Then I left for Valido, but the bandits captured me before I reached Aquila Plaza."

He was silent a moment, catching his breath. Then he went on:

"I was held at one hideout, then moved to a second. They didn't keep much of a guard on me at the second place. It looked as though they were giving me a chance to make a break, so they'd have a good excuse to shoot me. A tough hombre named Al Purcell was bossing the bandits at this second place."

"He had a deal on with Harper," the Rio Kid put in. "Purcell crossed up Harper, and tried to collect a second ransom payment. Harper wanted Purcell to kill you, Avery. I'm pretty sure of that."

"That could be," Avery said. "Anyway, I didn't try to escape until the other day when Purcell was away from the hideout. Then I made a break in broad daylight, and I went on foot. That sort of threw them off. Most of those bandits are just dumb peons, and without Purcell they didn't make much of a try at catching me. I found a hiding place, stayed there until dark, then kept moving all night. When daylight came again, I holed up.

"Well, I got this far. I kept away from the road because I was afraid I'd run into Harper or Kerrigan or somebody they might have hired to gun me. I figured I'd be safe if I once got to my father's house in Valido. But I was dead on my feet, coming through

Devil's Crossing, and Armand caught up with me. I guess he tried to kill me because he knew I'd given you information about him, Jeff."

Jeff Milton nodded.

Pryor said, "It looks as though Matt Kerrigan got too ambitious, too greedy. Or maybe he'd been losing too much money at cards and was hard up. I've heard that he's a gambling man. Anyway, he outsmarted himself. He knew better than to step over to the wrong side of the law. A man as intelligent as he is should be a power for good. Arizona Territory needs honest, decent men. It's got far too many of the wrong kind. Kerrigan could have made something of himself. But now—" He fell silent, shrugging.

"There's just one thing." Jeff Milton said, relighting his pipe. His face was grim, his dark eyes troubled. "It's Steve's word against Kerrigan's. And Matt Kerrigan is a big man in Valido. He has position, influence. I can arrest him, sure. But with only one witness—and his testimony hearsay—I won't have a case against him when I get him into court."

"But if he gets away with it—" Steve began.

Milton broke in, "I know. Once he's found that he can kick the law around, he'll go from bad to worse. He'll get more and more crooked. He—"

"He's not going to get away with it," Pryor said flatly. "You may need evidence that will stand up in court, Jeff. You may not be able to do anything about a crook unless you can prove him guilty to the satisfaction of a court, and by the rule-book, at that. But there's one person who doesn't go by the rules that govern lawmen."

"Meaning who?" Milton asked. "The Rio Kid?"

"Yes," Bob Pryor replied. "The Rio Kid."

IT WAS nearly midnight when they rode into Valido. The town was quiet, and for the most part dark. Steve Avery was mounted on the dead Jake Armand's horse, and he had made the long ride because he possessed the strength of will to overcome his physical weakness.

Jeff Milton came along to give legal backing to the Rio Kid's part in whatever occurred between the adventurer and Matt Kerrigan. Milton had left the chained Chinese at a sheep ranch about a mile from the Arizona end of the canyon. It would have been cruel to force them to walk all the way to Valido, in leg-irons and chained together. Milton would take a wagon out for them in the morning. He would also send a wagon out to bring in the bodies of the dead smugglers.

Before leaving the canyon, Bob Pryor had changed back into his uniform—and he felt more like the Rio Kid than when rigged out as a cowhand. On the way to Valido, he had told Steve Avery and Jeff Milton about that awful night of terror at Aquila Plaza.

Also, he told Steve about Katherine Eberts's trip to Santa Rosita. He warned the young man that his fiancée might not yet be back at his father's house.

They avoided the center of Valido, so as not to run the risk of being spotted by Kerrigan or Jess Harper, and entered the town by way of the side street where Colonel Phil Avery's house was located. It was a small plank house, unimposing as were all the houses in Valido, but the windows were lamplighted despite the late hour.

And Steve Avery exclaimed, "She's here! Katherine got back safely!"

He was right.

They had no more than reined in when the door swung open and Katherine cried excitedly, "Steve! Steve, darling!" She ran toward him, and was just in time to keep him from collapsing to the ground when he hastily dismounted. She flung her arms about him, and it seemed that Steve drew strength from her healthy young body.

Certainly, the man's wobbly knees did not buckle as they had threatened to do before Katherine touched him.

Old Colonel Avery came from the house, as eagerly if not as quickly, as Katherine. He gripped the Rio Kid's hand, said emotionally, "I knew you would bring him back, Captain! How I'll ever repay you, I don't know."

"You give me too much credit, sir," Pryor told him. "Steve was already back in Arizona when I found him. And it was Jeff here who patched up the wound Steve has in his shoulder. But you'll hear the whole story from your son. Jeff and I have some unfinished business at the moment. By the way, where is Celestino?"

"Your friend brought Katherine home," Colonel Avery said. "They arrived about two hours ago. Mireles said you'd told him to wait for you in Valido. I offered to put him up, but he said he would find a room over in the Mexican quarter." He laughed, as happy as the two young people who were now reunited. "Maybe there's a senorita over there who has caught his eye." Then, sobering, he asked, "This unfinished business of yours—Can I give you a hand with it?"

Pryor shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not," he said. "It has to do with your friend Matt Kerrigan. We've discovered that he is involved in the smuggling of Chinese, Colonel. Steve can tell you about that, too. We'll see you in the morning, of course."

The old man looked stunned. "Matt Kerrigan? I can't believe it!"

His son took his arm. "Come into the house," he urged. "I'll tell you about it, sir." He and Katherine led the old gentleman inside.

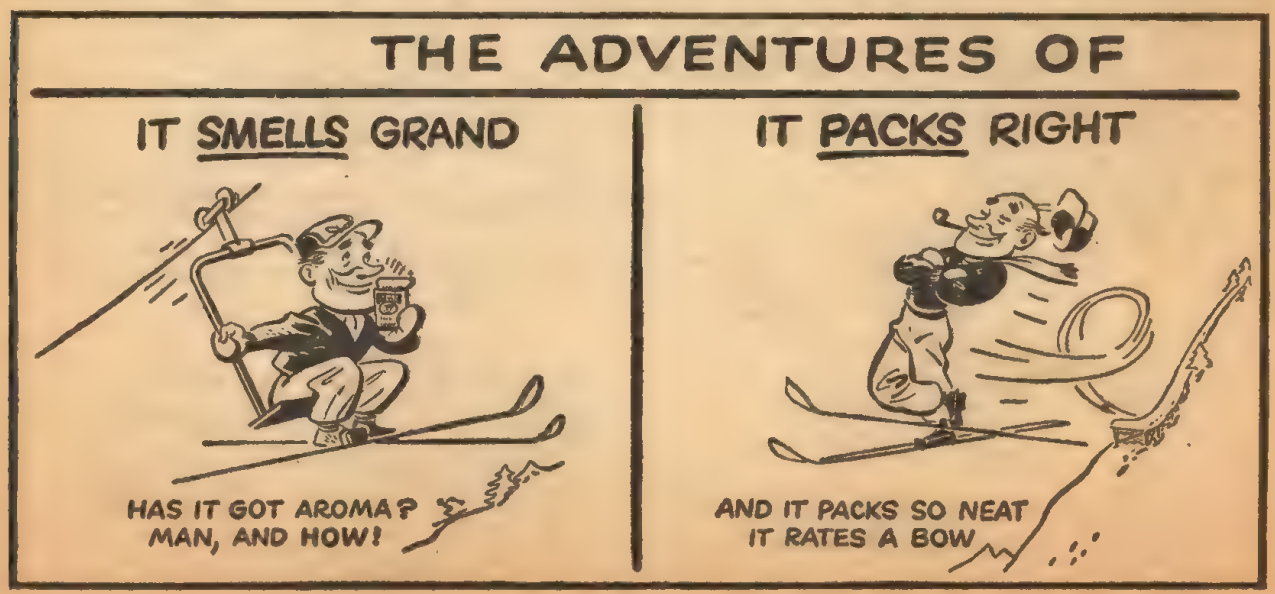
The Rio Kid and Jeff Milton mounted, rode toward the center of town.

There was a light in the office at the Valido Freighting Company's wagon yard where, not so many nights ago, the Rio Kid had kept Jake Armand's gunman from killing Matt Kerrigan. A saddled horse stood in front of the office.

They dismounted and left their horses by the wagon yard, approached the shack afoot. The door was closed, but the blind on the window was not fully drawn. They could see Kerrigan seated at his desk and Jess Harper standing before it. Harper was talking excitedly. The teamster must have ridden up from Mexico, leaving his freight rig behind, to bring Kerrigan some sort of news. Perhaps news that Steve Avery had escaped from the bandits.

THE Rio Kid glanced at Jeff Milton, and said softly, "Work on Harper. Arrest him for smuggling, and maybe he'll spook and involve Kerrigan."

Milton nodded, and they moved to



the door. Entering without knocking, they took the two men at the desk by surprise. Harper swung around, growled, "What the hell is all this?"

Kerrigan had better nerves. Recovering quickly from his surprise, he said, "Jeff, I thought you'd gone to Devil's Crossing to catch Jake Armand."

Milton closed the door, said, "I've been there and back. And I got Armand, thanks to you. But I'm after another smuggler now." He pointed at Harper. "This hombre. I guess he's had you fooled, Mr. Kerrigan, but he's been using your wagons to smuggle Chinese in from Mexico. I'm arresting him."

"Harper?" Kerrigan said, rising. "That's ridiculous!"

A sickly look spread over Jess Harper's tough bearded face. He took a backward step away from the desk.

The Rio Kid said, "That's not all. We want Harper for plotting with *El Bribon* and his lieutenant, Al Purcell, to kidnap and kill Steve Avery."

"Avery is dead?" Kerrigan asked. "The bandits killed him?"

"No, but Harper wanted them to," the Rio Kid replied. "Al Purcell crossed him up on the deal, to collect more ransom. Steve escaped finally, and he's now safe in his father's house—with his fiancée."

Kerrigan frowned, seemed somewhat upset. "I don't understand all this," he said. "Why should Jess Harper want Steve Avery killed?"

"Because Steve found out that he was smuggling Chinese," Bob Pryor said. "It seldom fails. When there's big money to be made crookedly, men don't shrink from killing, or from having killing done. Fortunately, Steve Avery wasn't killed. But there's enough on Harper to send him to Yuma Prison for the next ten years."

Harper muttered an oath. "I ain't admitting that you're sending me to Yuma," he said savagely, his hand on his holstered gun. "But if you do manage it, I won't go alone. Kerrigan will be keeping me company."

"What do you mean by that?" the Rio Kid demanded. "That you won't take the whole blame?" Harper was frightened enough to talk. "We know that Kerrigan was in cahoots with you," he went on, "but we've got no evidence on anybody but you. If you implicate Kerrigan, you're sure to get off with a lighter sentence."

Kerrigen's face paled. Fright replaced his self-confident look. "This is crazy," he said loudly, full of empty bluster. "You can't implicate me. You know that I raised most of the ten thousand dollars for Colonel Avery, to meet that second ransom demand! You know that, Pryor!"

[*Turn page*]

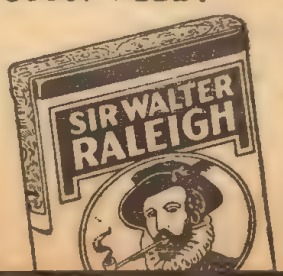
UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT'S THE PIPE-BLEND CHAMP YOU MUST ALLOW

IT CAN'T BITE!

A BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS, EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. SIR WALTER RALEIGH STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF — NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL.



It costs no more to get the Best!

"I know it. And I know why you were so generous. You were certain Avery was dead—or soon would be. But you had fallen hard for Katherine Eberts, and you handed over that money to make a grandstand play for her. You—"

KERRIGAN'S nerve cracked. He yelled, "Get your gun out, Jess!"

He struck out with his arm, knocked the lamp from his desk. The lamp crashed to the floor, went out, plunging the office into inky darkness. Harper's gun cut that darkness with a stab of powder-flame. Then Jeff Milton's six-shooter blasted.

Kerrigan bowled the Rio Kid aside, reached the door. He jerked the door open, ran outside. Harper's gun kept roaring, as did Milton's. Recovering his balance, the Rio Kid ran to the street. Kerrigan had flung himself onto Harper's horse. He wheeled the animal about, raced toward the end of the street and the dark desert beyond.

The Rio Kid had a gun in his hand, cocked and leveled, but he did not shoot. He hadn't it in him to shoot an unarmed man in the back. Still, he could not permit Kerrigan to make his getaway. Once in the desert, under cover of darkness, the man might escape to some outlaw hideout where he would be safe.

The Rio Kid whistled for Saber. The dun with the dark stripe down his back —the mark of the breed that never dies —came trotting toward him, and he rose to the saddle. He struck out along the dark street at a hard gallop, overtaking Kerigan just beyond the edge of town. As he came alongside, he saw Kerrigan bring his right hand across in front of himself. He held a derringer.

The Rio Kid had holstered his own weapon believing that the man he was pursuing was unarmed, and he had no time to draw a gun now. He struck out with his right fist, catching Kerrigan at the base of the skull. The derringer exploded, but harmlessly. Kerrigan's horse galloped on, but the man was so hard hit that he spilled from saddle. Kerrigan was unconscious on the ground when the Rio Kid wheeled Saber around and rode back to where the man lay. Jeff Milton came riding up. "Got him, eh?"

"And he's not too badly hurt. What about Harper?"

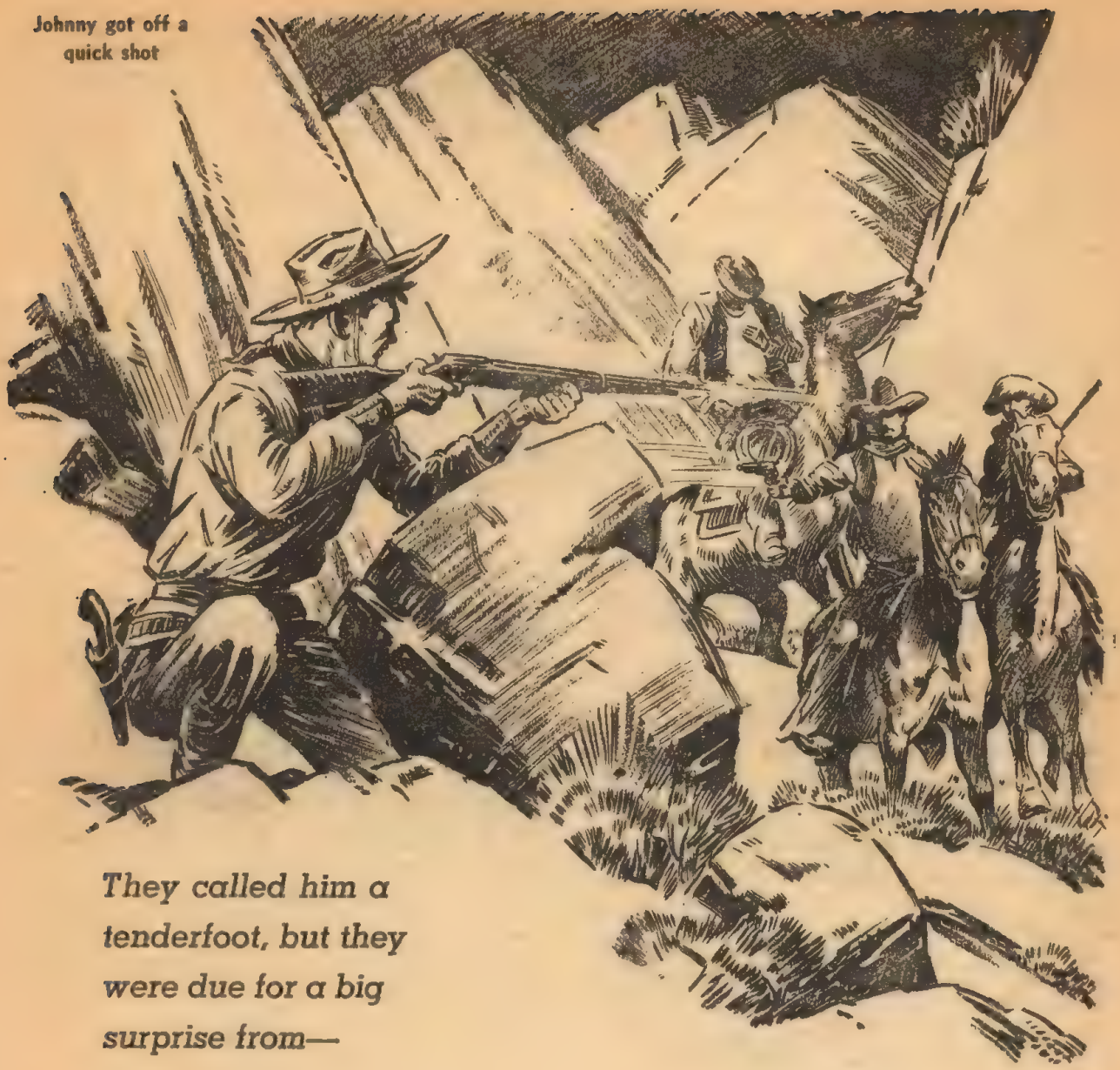
"A slug in his right arm and another in his left leg," Milton said. "He'll make a good witness, once we take the pair of them into court. He'll talk plenty to take Kerrigan along with him to Yuma." He offered his hand to Captain Pryor. "This won't make Arizona Territory a tame place, but it's a step in the right direction. And if the Rio Kid would stay around long enough—"

Colonel Phil Avery, Steve Avery and Katherine Eberts also wanted the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles to make their headquarters in Valido. The two *compadres* stopped around at the colonel's house the next morning, to find out how Steve was feeling. The young engineer was still far from strong, but he was happy. He and Katherine urged Pryor and Mireles to stay on in town, at least until after the wedding.

But Mireles, perhaps thinking of the lovely Maria de Baca down in Aquila Plaza, said, "*Gracias*, senor and senorita. But weddings are not happy events for bachelors like the General and me. We would be happy for you, but we would think how lonely we sometimes are. You understand?"

Perhaps the young couple did understand. It was more likely that they did not.

Watching the two men ride away, it was certainly incomprehensible for lovers to realize that for the Rio Kid and his friend only adventure had a siren's song. They rode from Valido, Bob Pryor and Mireles, which was but a speck on the vast face of Arizona Territory. And, since Arizona was the last haven of the West's worst badmen, it wasn't likely that they would ride far before they encountered Adventure once more. • • •



Johnny got off a quick shot

They called him a tenderfoot, but they were due for a big surprise from—

That Slash Seven Kid

JOHNNY LYLE rode up to the bog camp at Seep Spring just before noon. Bert Ramsey, foreman of the Slash Seven outfit glanced up and nodded briefly. Ramsey had troubles enough without having this brash youngster around.

"Say!" Johnny hooked a leg around the saddle horn. "Who's this Hook Lacey?"

Ramsey stopped walking. "Hook Lacey," he said, is just about the toughest hombre around here, that's all. He's a rustler and a horse thief, and the fastest hand with a gun in this part of the country since Garrett shot Billy the Kid."

"Ride alone?"

By JIM MAYO

"Naw. He's got him a gang nigh as mean as he is. Nobody wants any part of them."

"You mean you let 'em get away with rustling? We'd never cotton to that back on the Neuces."

Ramsey turned away irritably. "This ain't the Neuces. If you want to be useful why don't you go help Gar Mullins? The heel flies are driving cows into that quicksand faster'n he can drag 'em out."

"Sure." Johnny Lyle swung his leg back over the saddle. "Only I'd rather go after Lacey and his outfit."

"What?" Ramsey turned on him. "Are you crazy. Those hombres, any one of 'em would eat three like you for breakfast! If that bunch tackles us, we'll fight, but we'll not go huntin' 'em!"

"You mean you don't want me to,"

Ramsey was disgusted. What did this kid think he was doing, anyway? Like a fool kid, to make a big play in front of the hands, who were listening to impress them how tough he was. Well, there was a way to stop *that*!

"Why, no," he said drily. "If you want to go after those outlaws after you help Gar get the cattle out of the quicksand, go ahead."

Sundown was an hour past when Gar Mullins rode up to the corral at the Slash Seven. He stripped the saddle from his bronc and after a quick splash and a wipe he went in and dropped on a bench at the table. Old Tom West, the owner, looked up.

"Where's the kid?" he asked. "Where's my nephew? Didn't he come in?"

GAR was surprised. He glanced around the able.

"Shucks, ain't he here? He left me about three o'clock or so. Said Bert told him he could get Hook Lacey if he finished in time."

"What!" Tom West's voice was a bull bellow. His under jaw shot out. "Bert, did you tell him that?"

Ramsey's face grew red, then pale. "Now, look, Boss," he protested, "I figured he was talking to hear hisself make a big noise. I told him when he helped Gar get all them cows out, he could go after Lacey. I never thought he'd be fool enough to do it."

"Aw!" Chuck Allen grinned. "He's probably just rode into town! Where would he look for that outfit? And, how could he find 'em when we ain't been able to?"

"We ain't looked any too hard," Mullins said, "I know I ain't."

Tom West was silent. At last he spoke. "Nope, could never find 'em. But if anything happens to that boy, I'd never dare look my sister in the face again." He glared at Bert Ramsey. "If anything does happen to him you'd better be halfway to the Border before I hear it."

Johnny Lyle was a cheerful, easy-going, free-talking youngster. He was pushing eighteen, almost a man by Western standards, and as old as Billy the Kid when Billy was leading one of the forces in the Lincoln County War.

But Johnny was more than a brash, devil-may-care youngster. He had been born and raised on the Neuces, and had cut his riding teeth in the black chaparral between the Neuces and the Rio Grande. When his father died he had been fourteen, and his mother had moved East. Johnny had continued to hunt and wander in the woods of the Virginia mountains, but he had gone to New York several times each month.

In New York he had spent a lot of time in shooting galleries. In the woods he had hunted, tracked, and enjoyed fistic battles with rugged mountaineers. He had practiced drawing in front of a mirror until he was greased lightning with a gun. The shooting galleries gave him the marksmanship, and in the woods he had learned to become even more of a tracker than he had learned to be in the brush country of his father, to which he returned for his summer vacations.

Moreover, he had been listening as well as talking. Since he had been here on the Slash Seven, Gar Mullins had several times mentioned the rough country of Tierra Blanca Canyon as a likely hangout

for the rustlers. It was believed they disposed of many stolen cattle in the mining camps to the north, having a steady market for beef at Victorio and in the vicinity.

Tom West loved his sister and had a deep affection for his friendly, likable nephew, but Johnny was well aware that Tom also considered him a guest, and not a hand. Mullins could have told them the kid was both a roper and a rider, and had a lot of cow savvy, but Mullins rarely talked and never volunteered anything.

Johnny naturally liked to be accepted as an equal of the others, and it irritated him that his uncle treated him like a visiting tenderfoot. And because he was irked, Johnny decided to show them, once and for all.

Bert Ramsey's irritable toleration of him angered him.

Once he left Mullins, when the cattle were out of the quicksand, he headed across the country through Sibley Gap. He passed through the Gap at sundown, and made camp at a spring a few miles beyond. It could be no more than seven or eight miles further to the canyon of which Mullins had talked, for he was already on the Tierra Blanca.

At daybreak he was riding. On a sudden inspiration, he swung north and cut over into the trail for Victorio.

The mining town had the reputation of being a rugged spot, and intended to keep it. The town was named after the Apache chieftain who had several times taken a bad whipping trying to capture the place. Several thousand miners, gamblers, gunmen, and outlaws made the place a good one to steer clear of. But Johnny Lyle had not forgotten the talk about Slash Seven beefs being sold there by rustlers.

JOHNNY swung down from his horse in front of the Gold Pan Restaurant and walked back to a corral where he saw several beef hides hanging. The brand was Seven Seventy-seven, but when he turned the hide over he could see it had been changed from a Slash Seven.

"Hey!" A bellow from the door brought his head up. "Git away from those hides!"

The man was big. He had shoulders like the top of an upright piano and a seamed and battered face.

Johnny walked to the next hide and the next while the man watched. Of the five fresh hides three of them were Slash Sevens. He turned just in time to meet the rushing butcher.

Butch Jensen was big, but he was no mean rough-and-tumble scrapper. This cowhand was going to learn a thing or two.

"I told you to get away!" he shouted angrily, and drew back his fist.

That was his first mistake, for Johnny had learned a little about fighting while in New York. One thing was to hit from where your fist was. Johnny's fist was rubbing his chin when Jensen drew his fist back, and Johnny punched straight and hard, stepping in with the left.

The punch was short, wicked, and explosive. Jensen's lips mashed under hard knuckles and his hands came up. As they lifted, Johnny turned on the ball of his left foot and the toe of his right, and whipped a wicked right uppercut into Jensen's huge stomach.

Butch gasped, and then Johnny hit him with both hands and he went down. Coolly, Johnny waited for him to get up. And he got up, which made his second mistake. He got up and lunged, head down. A straight left took him over the eyebrow, ripping a gash, and a right uppercut broke his nose. And then Johnny Lyle went to work. What followed was short, interesting, and bloody. When it was over Johnny stood back.

"Now," he said, "get up and pay me sixty dollars for three Slash Seven steers."

"Sixty!' Butch Jensen spluttered. "Steers are going for twelve—fifteen dollars!"

"The steers you butchered are going

at twenty dollars," Johnny replied calmly. "If I ever find another hide around here, the price will be thirty dollars."

He turned away, but when he had taken three steps, he stopped. There was a good crowd around, and Johnny was young. This chance was too good to miss.

"You tell Hook Lacey," he said, "that if he ever rustles another head of Slash Seven stock I'll personally come after him!"

Johnny Lyle swaggered just a little as he walked into the Gold Pan and ordered a meal.

Yet as he was eating he began to get red around the ears. It had been a foolish thing to do, talking like that. Folks would think he was full of hot air.

Then he looked up into a pair of wide blue eyes. "Your order, sir?"

Two days later, Chuck Allen rode up to the ranchhouse and swung down. Bert Ramsey got up hastily from his chair.

"Chuck," he asked eagerly, "you see him?"

Chuck shook his head. "No," he said, "I ain't seen him, but I seen his trail. You better grab yourself a bronc, Bert, and start fogging it for the border. That kid's really started something."

The door opened and Tom West came out. "What's up?" he demanded. His face was gray with worry. "Confound it, what's the matter with these hands? Two days now I've had you all ridin' to find that kid, and you can't turn up a clue! Can't you blind bats even find a tenderfoot kid?"

Chuck grew a little red around the ears, but his eyes twinkled as he looked at Bert out of the corner of his eyes. "I crossed his trail, Boss, and she's some trail, believe you me!"

West shoved Bert aside. "Don't stand there like a slab-sided jackass! What happened? Where is he?"

CHUCK was taking his time, "Well," he said, "he *was* in Victorio. He rode in there the morning after he left the ranch. He found a couple of Slash Seven hides hanging on Butch Jensen's fence. They'd been burned over into Seven Seventy-sevens, but he found 'em, and then Butch Jensen found him."

"Oh, Lord!" West paled. "If that big brute hurt that kid, I'll kill him!"

"You won't need no war paint," Chuck said, aggravatingly slow, "because the kid took Butch to a swell three-sided whipping. Folks say Johnny just lit all over him, swinging in every direction. He whipped Butch to a frazzle!"

"Chuck," Bert burst out, "you're crazy! Why, that kid couldn't whip one side of—"

"But he did," Chuck interrupted. "He not only beat Butch up, but he made him pay for three head at twenty dollars a head. He further told him that the next hide he found on Butch's fence would cost him thirty dollars."

West swallowed. "And Butch took it?"

"Boss, if you'd seen Butch you'd not ask that question. Butch took everything the kid could throw, which was plenty. Butch looks like he'd crawled face first into a den of wildcats. But that ain't all."

They waited, staring at Chuck. He rolled a smoke, taking his time.

"He told everybody who was listening," he finally said. "And probably three or four of 'em was friends of Lacey, that if Hook rustled one more head of our stock he was going to attend to him personal."

West groaned and Bert Ramsey swallowed. But Chuck was not through.

"Then the kid goes into the Gold Pan. He ain't there more'n thirty minutes before he has that little blonde peacherino crazy about him. Mary, she's so crazy about that kid she can't even get her orders straight."

"Chuck," West demanded, "where's Johnny now? If you know, tell me!"

Chuck Allen grew sober. "That's the trouble, Boss. I don't know. But when he left Victorio he headed back into the mountains. And that was yesterday afternoon."

Bert Ramsey's face was pale. He liked

his job on the Slash Seven and knew West was quite capable of firing him as he had promised. Moreover, he was genuinely worried. That he had considered the boss' nephew a nuisance was true, but anybody who could whip Butch Jensen, and who could collect for stolen cattle was no tenderfoot, but a man to ride the river with. But to ride into the hills after Hook Lacey, after whipping Jensen, threatening Hook, and then walking off with the girl Hook wanted—that was insanity.

Whipping Jensen was something, but Hook Lacey wouldn't use his fists. He would use a gun, and he had killed seven men, at least. And he would have plenty of help.

DUDE RANCH LAMENT

To the hospital bring
Tenderfoot Taddle,
Tried riding a horse
Without any saddle.

—Pecos Pete

West straightened. "Bert," he said harshly, "you get Gar Mullins, Monty Reagan, and Bucky McCann and ride after that kid. And don't come back without him!"

Ramsey nodded. "Yes sir," he said. "I sure will get him."

"How about me?" Chuck asked. "Can I go too?"

At the very hour the little cavalcade was leaving the ranch, Johnny Lyle was lying on a ridge looking down into the upper canyon of the Tierra Blanca Canyon. A thin trail of smoke was lifting from the canyon, and he could see approximately where the camp was. He lay high on the rugged side of Seven Brothers Mountain, with the camp almost fifteen hundred feet below.

"All right, boy," he told himself, "you've made your brags. Now what are you going to do?"

North of the camp the canyon ran due north and south, but just below it took a sharp bend to the west, although a minor canyon trailed off south for a short distance in less rugged country. Their hideout, Johnny could see, was well chosen. There was obviously a spring, judging from the way their camp was located and the looks of the trees and brush, and there was a way out up the canyon to the north.

On the south, they could swing west around the bend. Johnny could see that this trail branched, and the branch beyond also branched. In taking any route they were well covered, with plenty of chance of a getaway unseen, or for defense if they so desired.

YET if they had to ride north up the canyon there was no way out for several miles. With a posse closing in from the south, one man could stop their escape to the north. Their camp at the spring however, was so situated that it was nearly impossible for them to be stopped from going south by anything less than a large posse. It was fairly obvious though, that if they were attacked they would ride south.

The idea that came to him was the wildest kind of a gamble, but he decided to take the chance, for there was a possibility that it might work. To plan ahead was impossible. All he could do was start the ball rolling and take advantage of what opportunity offered.

Mounting his horse, he rode along a bench of Seven Brothers and descended the mountain on the southwest. In the canyon to the west he hastily gathered sticks and built a fire, laying a foundation of crossed dry sticks of some size, gathered from canyon driftwood and ar-

ranged in such a way as to burn for some time. The fire was built among rocks and on dry sand so there was no way for it to spread, and no way for it to be seen, though the rising smoke could be seen.

Circling further south and east, he built three more fires. His hope was that the smoke from all of them would be seen by the outlaws who would deduce that a posse, having approached during the night, now was preparing breakfast, with every way out blocked. If they decided this, and without a careful scouting expedition which would consume time, the outlaws would surely retreat up the canyon to the north.

Johnny Lyle worked fast and he worked hard, adding a few sticks of green wood to increase the smoke. When his last fire had been built, he mounted again and rode north on the east side of Stoner Mountain. Now the mountain was between him and the outlaws and he had no idea of what they would do. His gamble was that by riding north he could hit the canyon of the Tierra Blanca after it swung east, and intercept the escaping outlaws.

He rode swiftly, aware that he could travel faster than they, but with no idea whether or not they had seen his fires and were moving. His first idea was to ride into the bottom of the canyon and meet them face to face, but Hook Lacey was a rugged character as were his men, and the chances were they would elect to fight. He chose the safer way and crawled down among some rocks.

An hour had passed before they appeared. He knew none of them, but rightly guessed the swarthy man with the hook nose was Lacey. He let them get within thirty yards, then yelled:

"All right, boys! Drop your guns and get your hands up! We've got you bottled!"

There was an instant of frozen silence, then Lacey's gun leaped to his hand. He let out a wild yell and the riders charged right up the slope and at Johnny Lyle.

Suddenly panic-stricken, Johnny got off a quick shot that burned the hindquarters of Lacey's plunging horse and hit the pommel of the rider following him. Glancing off, it ripped the following man's arm. Then the riders were right at him.

Johnny sprang aside, working the lever of his Winchester, but they were too close. Wildly he grabbed iron, and then took a wicked blow on the skull from a clubbed six-shooter. He went down, stunned but not out, and managed a quick shot with his six-gun that dropped a man. And then he was up and running. He had only time to grab his Winchester and dive into the rocks.

Cut off from his horse, he was in desperate straits. It would be a matter of minutes, or even seconds before they would realize only one man had been shooting. Then they would come back.

Scrambling into the rocks, he worked himself higher, striving for a vantage point. They had seen him, though, and a rifle bullet ricocheted off the rocks and whined nastily past his ear. He levered three fast shots from his rifle at the scattering riders. Then the area before him was deserted, the morning warm and still, and the air was empty.

HIS head throbbed, and when he put a hand to his skull he found that despite his protecting hat, his scalp had been split. Only the fact that the rider had been going away when he fired, and that the felt hat he was wearing was heavy had saved him from a broken skull.

A sudden move brought a twinge. Looking down, he saw blood on the side of his shirt. Opening it, he saw that a bullet—from where he had no idea—had broken the skin along his side.

Hunkered down behind some rocks, he looked around. His position was fairly secure, though they could approach him from in front and on the right. His field of fire to the front was good, but if they ever got on the cliff across the canyon he was finished.

What lay behind him he did not know, but the path he had taken along a ledge seemed to dwindle out on the cliff face.

He had ammunition, but no water, and no food.

Tentatively he edged along, as if to move forward. A rifle shot splashed splinters in his face and he jerked back, stung.

"Boy," he said to himself, "you've played hob!"

Suddenly he saw a man race across the open in front of him and he fired a belated shot that did nothing but hurry the man. Obviously that man was heading for the cliff across the canyon. Johnny Lyle reloaded his Winchester and checked his pistol. With both loaded he was all set, and he looked behind him at the path. Then he crawled back. As he had suspected, the path dwindled out and there was no escape.

The only way out was among the boulders to his right from where without doubt the outlaws were also approaching. His rifle ready, he crouched, waiting. Then he came up with a lunge and darted for the nearest boulders. A bullet whipped by his ear, another ricocheted from a rock behind him. Then he hit the sand sliding and scrambled at once to a second boulder.

Someone moved ahead of him and raising himself to his knees Johnny shucked his pistol and snapped a quick shot.

There was a brief silence, then a sudden yell and a sound of horses. Instantly there was another shout and a sound of running. Warily Johnny looked out. A stream of riders were rushing up the canyon and the outlaws were riding back down the canyon at breakneck speed.

Carefully, he got to his feet. Gar Mullins was first to see him and he yelled. The others slid to a halt. Limping a little on a bruised leg, Johnny walked toward the horsemen.

"Man," he said, "am I ever glad to see you fellers!"

Ramsey stared at him, sick with relief. "What go into you?" he demanded gruffly. "Trying to tackle that bunch by your lonesome?"

Johnny Lyle explained his fires and the idea he'd had. "Only trouble was," he said ruefully, "they rushed me instead of dropping their guns, but it might've worked!"

Gar Mullins bit off a chew and glanced at Chuck with twinkling eyes. "Had it been me it would've worked, kid." He glanced at Bert. "Reckon we should finish it now they're on the run?"

"We better let well enough alone," Ramsey said. "If they think there's a posse down canyon, they'll hole up and make a scrap of it. We'd have to dig 'em out one by one."

"I'd rather wait and get 'em in the open," Monty Reagan said honestly. "That Lacey's no bargain." He looked with real respect at Lyle. "Johnny, I take my hat off to you. You got more nerve than me, to tackle that crowd singlehanded."

Bucky McCann came up. "He got one, too," he gloated. "Pete Gabor's over there with a shot through the head."

"That was luck," Johnny said. "They come right at me and I just cut loose."

"Get any others?"

"Winged one, but it was a ricochet."

Gar spat. "They count," he said, chuckling a little. "We better get out of here."

CONSIDERABLY chastened, Johnny Lyle fell in alongside of Gar and they started back. Several miles further along, when they were riding through Sibley Gap, Gar said:

"Old Tom was fit to be tied, kid. You shouldn't ought to go off like that."

"Aw," Johnny protested, "everybody was treating me like a goose-headed tenderfoot! I got tired of it."

The week moved along slowly. Johnny Lyle's head stopped aching and his side began to heal. He rode out to the bog camp every day and worked hard. He was, Ramsey admitted, "a hand." Nothing more was said about his brush with the Lacey gang except for a brief comment by Bucky McCann.

There was talk of a large band of Mexican bandits raiding over the Border.

"Shucks," Bucky said carelessly,

"nothing to worry about! If they get too rambunctious we'll sic Johnny at 'em! That'll learn 'em!"

But Johnny Lyle was no longer merely the boss' nephew. He was a hand, and he was treated with respect, and given rough friendship.

Nothing more was heard of Lacey. The story had gone around, losing nothing in the telling. The hands of the Slash Seven cow crowd found the story too good to keep. A kid from the Slash Seven, they said, had run Lacey all over the rocks, Lacey and all of his outfit.

Hook Lacey heard the story and flushed with anger. When he thought of the flight of his gang up the canyon from a lot of untended fires, and then their meeting with the Lyle kid, who single-handed not only had stood them off but had killed one man and wounded another, his face burned. If there was one thing he vowed to do, it was to get Johnny Lyle.

Nobody had any actual evidence on Lacey. He was a known rustler, but it had not been proved. Consequently, Lacey showed up around Victorio whenever he was in the mood. And he seemed to be in the mood a great deal after the scrap in Tierra Blanca Canyon. The payoff came suddenly and unexpectedly.

Gar Mullins had orders to ride to Victorio and check to see if a shipment of amunition and equipment intended for the Slash Seven had arrived. Monty Reagan was to go along, but Monty didn't return from the bog camp in time, so Lyle asked his uncle if he could go.

Reluctantly, Tom West told him to go ahead. "But don't you go asking for trouble!" he said irritably. But in his voice was an underlying note of pride, too. After all, he admitted, the kid came of fighting stock. "If anybody braces you, that's different!"

Victorio was basking in a warm morning sun when the two cowhands rode into the street. Tying up at the Gold Pan, Johnny left Gar to check on the supplies while he went to get a piece of apple pie. Not that he was fooling Gar, or even himself. It was that blonde behind the counter that he wanted to see.

Hook Lacey was drinking coffee when Johnny entered. Lacey looked up, then set his cup down hard, almost spilling the coffee.

Mary smiled quickly at Johnny, then threw a frightened look at Lacey.

"Hello, Johnny," she said, her voice almost failing her. "I—I didn't expect you."

Johnny was wary. He had recognized Lacey at once, but his uncle had said he wasn't to look for trouble.

"Got any apple pie?" he asked.

She placed a thick piece before him, then filled a cup with coffee. Johnny grinned at her, and began to eat. "Mmm!" he said, liking the pie. "You make this?"

"No, my mother did."

"She sure makes good pie!" Johnny was enthusiastic. "I've got to get over here more often!"

"Surprised they let you get away from home," Lacey said, "but I see you brought a nursemaid with you."

NOW Tom West had advised Johnny to keep out of trouble, and Johnny, an engaging and easy-going fellow, intended to do just that, up to a point. This was the point.

"I didn't need a nursemaid over on the Tierra Blanca," he said cheerfully. "From the way you high-tailed over them rocks, I figured it was you needed one!"

Lacey's face flamed. He came off the bench, his face dark with anger. "Why, you—"

Johnny looked around at him. "Better not start anything," he said. "You ain't got a gang with you."

Lacey was in a quandary. Obviously the girl was more friendly to Johnny than to him. That meant that he could expect no help from her should she be called on to give testimony following a killing. If he drew first he was a gone gosling, for he knew enough about old Tom West to know the Slash Seven out-

fit would never stop hunting if this kid was killed in anything but a fair fight. And the kid wasn't even on his feet.

"Listen!" he said harshly. "You get out of town! If you're in this town one hour from now, I'll kill you!"

Slamming down a coin on the counter, he strode from the restaurant.

"Oh, Johnny!" Mary's face was white and frightened. "Don't stay here! Go now! I'll tell Gar where you are. Please go!"

"Go?" Johnny was feeling a fluttering in his stomach, but it angered him that Mary should feel he had to leave. "I will not go! I'll run *him* out of town!"

Despite her pleading, he turned to the door and walked outside. Gar Mullins was nowhere in sight. Neither was Lacey. But a tall, stooped man with his arm in a sling stood across the street, and Johnny Lyle guessed at once that he was a lookout, that here was the man he had winged in the canyon fight. And winged though the man was, it was his left arm, and his gun hung under his right hand.

Johnny Lyle hesitated. Cool common sense told him that it would be better to leave. Actually, Uncle Tom and the boys all knew he had nerve enough, and it was no cowardice to dodge a shoot-out with a killer like Hook Lacey. The boys had agreed they wouldn't want to tangle with him.

Just the same, Johnny doubted that any one of them would dodge a scrap if it came to that. And all his Texas blood and training rebelled against the idea of being run out of town. Besides, there was Mary. It would look like he was a pure D coward to run out now.

Yet what was the alternative? Within an hour, Hook Lacey would come hunting him. Hook would choose the ground, place, and time of meeting. And Hook was no fool. He knew all the tricks.

What then, to do?

The only thing, Johnny Lyle decided, was to meet Lacey first. To hunt the outlaw down and force him into a fight before he was ready. There was nothing wrong with using strategy, with using a trick. Many gunfighters had done it. Billy the Kid had done it against the would-be killer, Joe Grant. Wes Hardin had used many a device.

Yet what to do? And where? Johnny Lyle turned toward the corral with a sudden idea in mind. Suppose he could appear to have left town? Wouldn't that lookout go to Hook with the news? Then he could come back, ease up to Lacey suddenly, and call him, then draw.

Gar Mullins saw Johnny walking toward the corral, then he spotted the lookout. Mullins intercepted Johnny just as he stepped into saddle.

"What's up, kid? You in trouble?"

Briefly Johnny explained. Gar listened and, much to Johnny's relief, registered no protest. "All right, kid. You got it to do if you stay in this country, and your idea's a good one. You ever been in a shoot-out before?"

"No, I sure haven't."

"Now, look. You draw natural, see? Don't pay no mind to being faster'n he is. Chances are you ain't anywheres close to that. You figure on getting that first shot right where it matters, you hear? Shoot him in the body, right in the middle. No matter what happens, hit him with the first shot, you hear me?"

"Yeah."

JOHNNY felt sick at his stomach and his mouth was dry, his heart pounding.

"I'll handle that lookout, so don't pay him no mind." Gar looked up. "You a good shot, Johnny?"

"On a target I can put five shots in a playing card."

"That's all right, but this card'll be shooting back. But don't you worry. You choose your own spot for it."

"Wait!" Johnny had an idea. "Listen, you have somebody get word to him that Butch Jensen wants to see him. I'll be across the street at the wagon yard. When he comes up, I'll step out."

He rode swiftly out of town. Glancing back, he saw the lookout watching. Gar Mullins put a pack behind his own saddle

and apparently readied his horse for the trail. Then he walked back down the street.

He was just opposite the wagon yard when he saw the lookout stop on a street corner, looking at him. At the same instant, Hook Lacey stepped from behind a wagon. Across the street was Webb Foster, another of the Lacey crowd. There was no mistaking their purpose, and they had him boxed!

Gar Mullins was thirty-eight, accounted an old man on the frontier, and he had seen and taken part in some wicked gun battles. Yet now he saw his position clearly. This was it, and he wasn't going to get out of this one. If Johnny had been with him—But Johnny wouldn't be in a position for another ten minutes.

Hook Lacey was smiling. " You were in the canyon the other day, Gar," he said triumphantly. "Now you'll see what it's like. We're going to kill you, Gar. Then we'll follow that kid and get him. You ain't got a chance, Gar."

Mullins, knew it, yet with a litte time, even a minute, he might have.

"Plannin' on wiping out the Slash Seven, Hook?" he drawled. "That's what you'll have to do, if you kill that kid. He's the old man's nephew."

"Ain't you worried about yourself, Gar?" Lacey sneered. "Or are you just wet-nursing that kid?"

Gar's seamed and hard face was set. His eyes flickered to the lookout whose hand hovered only an inch above his gun. And to Webb, with his thumb hooked in his belt. There was no use waiting. It would be minutes before the kid would be set.

And then the kid's voice sounded, sharp and clear.

"I'll take Lacey, Gar! *Get that lookout!*"

Hook Lacey whipped around, drawing as he turned. Johnny Lyle, who had left his horse and hurried right back, grabbed for his gun. He saw the big, hard-faced man before him, saw him clear and sharp. Saw his hand flashing down, saw the broken button on his shirt front, saw the Bull Durham tag from his pocket, saw the big gun come up. But his own gun was rising, too.

The sudden voice, the turn, all conspired to throw Lacey off, yet he had drawn fast and it was with shock that he saw the kid's gun was only a breath slower. It was that which got him, for he saw that gun rising and he shot too quick. The bullet tugged at Johnny's shirt collar, and then Johnny, with that broken button before his eyes, fired.

Two shots, with a tiny but definite space between them, and then Johnny looked past Lacey at the gun exploding in Webb Foster's hands. He fired just as Gar Mullins swung his gun to Webb. Foster's shot glanced off the iron rim of a wagon wheel just as Gar's bullet crossed Johnny's in Webb Foster's body.

The outlaw crumpled slowly, grabbed at the porch awning, then fell off into the street.

JOHNNY stood very still. His eyes went to the lookout who was on his hands and knees on the ground, blood dripping in great splashes from his body. Then they went to Hook Lacey. The broken button was gone, and there was an edge cut from the tobacco tag. Hook Lacey was through, his chips all cashed. He had stolen his last horse.

Gar Mullins looked at Johnny Lyle and grinned weakly. "Kid," he said softly, walking toward him, hand outstretched, "we make a team. Here on out, it's saddle partners, hey?"

"Sure, Gar." Johnny did not look again at Lacey. He looked into the once bleak blue eyes of Mullins. "I ride better with a partner. You got that stuff for the ranch?"

"Yeah."

"Then if you'll pick up my horse in the willows, yonder, I'll say goodbye to Mary. We'd best be getting back. Uncle Tom'll be worried."

Gar Mullins chuckled, walking across the street, arm in arm with Johnny.

"Well, he needn't be," Gar said. "He needn't be." • • •

THEN and NOW

By SYL MacDOWELL

AN ALERT and observing city man was making a long tour. Almost everywhere he traveled through the Western range country he saw deep, ugly furrows gashed on the open landscape.

Curious and exasperated, the tourist finally stopped at a ranchhouse and asked:

"What's going on out here? Why do you let some drunken bulldozer roam around and mess up the scenery?"

The rancher was befuddled for a moment. Then, as the other's meaning dawned on him, he broke out with a good-natured grin.

"What you see are bulldozer trenches, all right," he said. "They're bladed out by big sixty-ton caterpillar tractors. But they're not dug aimless, no sirree. Every foot is carefully surveyed beforehand. And your 'drunken bulldozer' is Uncle Sam himself."

"I don't get it," said the city man. "Why?"

"It's part of the erosion control program. The idea isn't to damage the land but to protect it. Those contour ditches keep the soil from washing away by diverting storm runoff into thousands of small depressions, natural catch basins, where the water is absorbed instead of causing damaging floods."

The Grass Grew Lean

There, in a nutshell, the rancher stated the gospel of range management that the U.S. Bureau of Agriculture has preached for 50 years, ever since the serious decline in range production set in.

The official figures astound anyone who has not known the Western range "then and now." Originally, it was capable of supporting 22½ million head of livestock, and probably did, counting large grazing animals such as buffalo, elk and antelope. Today, the same area carries only 11 million head.

Back in the nineties, only four acres of grazing were needed per month for one cow, or five sheep. Now six to 18 acres per animal unit is needed. Rangeland has been impoverished by over-grazing and by the tragic aftermath of erosion. A system of contour ditches reaching from Canada to Mexico is only a small part of a long range program designed to protect our grasslands, and in some cases restore them.

What is the Western range? It is defined as the land area west of an irregular line that runs southward through the Dakotas, across Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas to the region around Brownsville. It embraces 728 million acres. That is nearly 40 percent of the total land area of the United States.

Vital Need for Action

This enormous expanse is one of our great natural resources along with forests, farmland, coal, oil, iron and other minerals. Its value has been seriously under-estimated in the past, and so neglected and abused.

The pioneer ranchers were too close to the land to see and understand the causes of range deterioration. Later ranchers, hard-pressed by competition and the growing demand for meat, had little or no control over circumstances.

Into this breach stepped the government conservationists—"soil missionaries." They attacked the landsaving problem by many methods, including huge and expensive dams.

Some unremembered saver of soil instead of souls thought up the scheme of contour drainage. It was extremely inexpensive, but experimental sections proved successful.

The name of this uncheered, undecorated crusader is forgotten, but his accomplishment is written across all Western rangeland, a record that will glorify him forever as "the unknown soldier of public service."

HELL ON HIGH WHEELS

a novelet by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

CHAPTER I

Poisoned Creek

HE CAME to a halt on the brushy bank of the Salado. He was a long hombre, straight in the saddle in spite of the heat and the wide reach of the desert that lay behind him now. He was a mixture of things, as all men must be; the planes of his face were calm, yet his eyes were ones that smiled a lot. There was a hint of a stubborn will in the set of his mouth.

Wiping sweat and trail dust from his face, he listened.

He shook his head. There was no rumble of a stamp mill in the air here. Back in Desert Wells they had said that the best way to reach Gazelle was to strike straight west from the stage road. But somehow he must have missed.

He let his horse pick its way down the bank to the water.

The bullet came then, making a flat spang of sound and kicking up water five feet from the thirsty horse's reaching muzzle.

The animal snorted and reared. The rider made no effort to control it. Sure in his saddle, he slapped a hand to the

Clane waited there with his gun drawn

Cowboy turned freighter, Clane Lamont was rough and tough but loyal—and he needed all his qualities in this fight!

walnut stock of his gun and whipped an intent glance along the far bank of the creek.

A girl was there, crouched on one knee near the brush that had kept him from seeing her before. She was levering a fresh shell into the chamber of her rifle. Behind her were two horses, one with its reins down and one that carried a short, heavy man with a broad face and a gray mustache.

Both the man and the girl kept their eyes on the long hombre.

"Don't get edgy, Clane Lamont!" the girl called. "You weren't being shot at. I just didn't want your horse to get that water."

The long hombre kept his hand on his gun. He frowned at the sparkling-clear water of the creek.

"Down there," the girl called, pointing.

The rider saw the dead coyote then. It lay on the bank a few yards downstream with its head partly in the water. There were no signs of a struggle, nothing to indicate that the animal had been shot. It was as if it had touched

the water and toppled on the spot.

"The creek is poisoned," the girl said. "Keep your horse away from it, Mr. Lamont."

NOW that made it twice she had called him by name. He let his hand come away from his gun and touched his hat. "Your advantage, miss."

She gave her head a wilful toss. She put aside the rifle and stood up, her boots spread solidly on the ground and her fists thrust into her levi pockets. "If names bother you, I'm Ann Weston of the Bar W. This is my foreman, Felipe O'Ryan."

Lamont lifted his glance briefly to the man's tied-down six-gun, then to the swarthy face. Mixed blood there. Mexican and Irish—and pride in both of them. A fighter, toughened by experience and made wily by age.

He looked again at the girl. She was about twenty and her big hat hung across shoulders that were held erect. Her brown hair was glossy and her tanned face was one a man could call pretty. But her lifted chin seemed to token a wish to deny a rounded feminity that, even in shirt and levis, wouldn't be denied.

"Paul Reber sent for you," she was saying. "For Clane Lamont, the freighter who can do anything—and celebrate it in a honkatonk. Felipe and I saw you coming across the desert. Reber's mill is half a mile upstream, in case you're lost."

"I don't hear it," Clane said.

"No. The stamps aren't running." She seemed pleased by this. "They won't run ever again, not in spite of anything you can do."

Clane gave her a shadowy grin. "Do you always pack a rifle?"

"When it's necessary. I can put a bullet where I want it, at three hundred yards. Which is more than any man can do with a six-gun. I like the advantage it gives me. Good day, Mr. Lamont."

She turned to her horse. She had one small boot in stirrup when Clane called, "Thanks for warning me about the water."

"I was thinking," she said, "of your horse."

The girl had been right about the mill. Twenty towering stamps were in the long, shedlike building, with no ore in the trays and no steam escaping from the cylinders. Paul Reber was poking into a vat of concentrates, his close-cropped blond head bent intently until the sound of Clane's spurs brought him around.

A pair of deep blue eyes, set in a beef-red face that never did get shaved without a nick or two, inspected Clane. "Took your time!" Reber was big and his voice was big; it rumbled through the mill.

"There's some desert," Clane said, "between here and Silver City."

Reber grunted and turned back to his concentrate vat. This was the Reber who had staked a twenty-year-old cowhand over in New Mexico. The hombre who never could find words for his say. The one who had put a big thumb to the ribs of the kid who thought he could be a freighter, had found it rough going, and was broke and discouraged.

That was five years behind them now. When Reber wrote a letter and said he needed help, he got it.

"You need ore in here," Clane said. "Where's the mine?"

"You saw that line of mountains west of here? Mine's beyond, eight miles. Ben Cornwall found the vein. Called it the Gazelle—hell of a fool name for a mine. We got a partnership. Contracted with an hombre to build a road, because the mill's got to be here where the water is. He built it. Then he threw our earnest money in our faces and said it's *his* road. With toll at twenty dollars a ton for ore. That's most of what we can get out of it."

"I met a girl who claims the creek is poisoned."

The red face came around again.

"That. Cyanide, is my guess. None of it here. We use mercury, and we're too poor to throw it in any creek." Reber's body came around. "You forget that letter. Get out."

"I just got here. On your say-so."

"Out. I was a damned old fool, shooting off my mouth about what you could do till I believed it myself. This ain't just a freighting job any more. Only one pass through those mountains and Voss, with his road, has got it. He's brought in guns to hold it."

"I'll see Ben Cornwall," Clane said.

"At the mine. But damn, this thing has got away from Ben and me and there's no call for you to—"

"You're putting on weight, Paul. Fat makes a man timid. . . ."

THE road had been laid out by a man with freighting savvy. Steep grades, yes, but not long ones. And always a break at the top, a flat spot contrived even at cost of a longer haul, to give the animals a chance to get their wind for the next pull.

A guard sat cross-legged on a rock, where the road snaked through the narrow pass. There was a litter of cigarette stubs around his boots. And a rifle in his hands. His sharp, pock-marked face watched Clane Lamont as he said, "Pass along, stranger. No wheels on you."

Clane reined up. "The part about wheels, friend, I don't savvy."

"Eli Voss' say—it's his road. No wheels turn over it till the fills have settled."

They were holding the road open for traffic, though they limited it—a pretext of some sort, with an eye on Territorial law. Clane put it away in his mind and rode on.

The western grades, letting down toward the distant, sprawling camp, were the easy ones which the wagons would climb when loaded with ore.

Sunset was throwing its crimson across the sky, behind the mine's headrig that reared from the top of a hill, when Clane reached the camp.

He had seen many such. A single street, churned to dust and lined on both sides with hastily erected adobe shacks, a few houses made of new lumber, dozens of tents stretched tight on wooden frames. Some false-fronted business buildings.

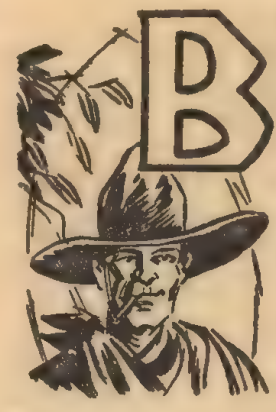
On one of those structures was a sign that read:

GAZELLE MINING & MILLING CO.

The man who came out of it and locked the door behind him limped slightly. Clane Lamont called, "Ben!" and swung down from his mount.

CHAPTER II

A Pretty Hard Head



BEN CORNWALL had a calloused hand that felt like iron. He was past sixty. His face was seamed and his shoulders appeared too massive for the rest of him—years of work underground had made him so. He said, "You're lookin' well, Clane. But you shouldn't of—"

"I'll need wagons and mules," Clane said. "And teamsters."

Cornwall shook his grizzled head. "Still in a hurry. Well, it won't go this time. Paul had no business sending for you. He lives in his own world and it's full of stamps and retorts and ore. The notions he gets on other matters ain't practical ones."

"You've got no ore at the mill."

"No," Cornwall admitted, "we ain't. We needed a road to that mill. Man by name of Voss built it for us on a verbal contract. That's the last damn time I'll ever accept any verbal contract!"

"Paul told me about it. How come the poison in Salado Creek?"

Cornwall's heavy brows lifted. "You always did get around fast. Well, you've seen that girl. When she claims we poisoned that crick she's a charming liar. But now none of the ranchers will sell us beef, so we're freighting in salt meat from California. We're feeding the men an' keeping them at work—we've got to, else we'd have no crew at all—an we're going broke doing it."

"Where's the law?"

"Up in Prescott where the chairs are soft. Voss has done nothing we could charge him with, and a civil suit would drag on for as long as the lawyers could stretch it. Too long, for us. Our bet is to sit tight. Voss has money in that road, money he got from somebody, and he's paying not a nickel of it back. His toll will come down."

Clane shook his head. "You've got ore and you've got a mill, and you sit down and wait. It's no good, Ben. You'll go broke at it and then you'll have to sell. At whose price?"

Cornwall snapped, "Damn it, I was young once, too and running over with confidence and everything looked simple. It don't any more. If you've got to take a side in this, there's plenty of time. Right now I'm buying you a drink. You've got friends in this camp —Arch Madden, Dake Thorne, maybe others. We'll make it a night. Lu Starr sings in the Golden Stope, and her eyes'll light up when she sees you."

"I want to see Eli Voss. Where do I find him?"

"Not now, Clane. Later."

"Now," Clane said.

Eli Voss had a little adobe office tucked against the side of the Mercantile to save the building of a wall. Clane went in.

What stopped him then was not the man who sat behind the rough board desk. It was the face of the girl who whirled, angered by the intrusion, to glare at him.

It was Ann Weston. Though the lamp on the desk was behind her now, he saw that her eyes were brown and lovely, even in anger.

She thrust her fists into her levi pockets and she turned her head slightly to speak to the man behind her. "This is the man, Mr. Voss," she said. Then she strode past Clane and was gone.

Voss was about forty. His jaw was long and angular, his forehead broad. He said, "You startled the lady, Lamont."

"That I did. I'm a freighter, Voss—it's a business that puts rough edges on a man. I'm going to haul the Gazelle ore to the mill, and I want a deal with you for the use of the road."

Voss took a cigar from the pocket of his coat. "Thirty dollars a ton," he said.

Clane's mouth tightened. "When I heard the toll quoted it was twenty—which is about what Reber and Cornwall get out of it." He put his hands on the desk. "There's no sense in this. What does it buy you? Why peg your price so high that you get no return at all?

Voss looked at the cigar. "Mr. Lamont, you're a stranger to me."

HE WAS saying that he didn't discuss his business policy with outsiders. Particularly one against whom he had been warned.

Anger started building within Clane Lamont. And that was a bad thing. In a brawl it was all right, but this was a battle of another sort and a man needed to keep his wits clear.

By some caprice, though, Clane's anger turned toward Ann Weston. She had warned Voss about Clane's arrival and had headed off his chance to hit Voss with a quick deal and get an answer before the man got his feet under him.

There was a connection here that baffled Clane. The girl had a grudge against the mine, and wanted it shut down. Had she charmed Voss into blocking the ore wagons?

That seemed unlikely. She denied her charm, which in itself seemed to verge on being a crime of some sort. Money,

then? Had she bought Voss with money?

Clane felt a sudden urge to confront that high-chinned girl again and get an answer out of her. That would put a weapon in his hands so he would know how to hit Voss so it would hurt him.

He said, "We'll talk later, Voss. Right now I've got something to do."

It was almost dark when he moved along the street at a driving stride, looking for the girl. There was a livery corral behind one of the rows of houses. And the girl was there, mounting her horse while a hostler held a lantern to give her light.

Clane cut through the deeply shadowed space between two adobes. He opened his mouth to call to the girl.

There was a faint sound behind him. Something crashed down against his head and the world exploded into light that blazed unbearably and then was gone. He pitched forward into blackness and utter quiet. . . .

The pain came in waves, and each of them tried to pry his head apart. He opened his eyes and found that he lay on a bed. His hat and gun-belt hung on a chair nearby. Behind the chair was a window, and beyond the window was a patio where some magic had contrived a cool little world of grass and flowers.

A pleasant throaty voice said, "Howdy, mister."

He turned his head toward the sound of it and saw that Lu Starr was watching him with anxious green eyes. He managed to grin a bit. "It's been a while, Lu."

"Hasn't it? Last time it was in Deming, and a bunch of freighters tried to corner you in the saloon. You beat them down, but I had to have you carried to my room so the doctor could patch you. Mister, I—" She bit her lip and fell silent.

He swung his legs carefully over the edge of the bed and sat there looking at her. Lu Starr had grown up in the camps. She was a year or so younger than Clane and her hair was black and her lips could always smile. She was in the full bloom of womanhood now, lovely as one of the carefully tended flowers in her patio. Her tight-bodiced dress left her shoulders bare.

She could sing, this Lu Starr. She could sing the rollicking songs the hard-rock men liked and she could smile as they wanted to see a woman smile when they came up from underground. She dressed to please their eyes—but the man who laid a hand on her asked for trouble.

"So here I am again," Clane said. "Thanks, Lu."

Her red lips trembled. "Mister, does it buy you? What does it buy any of us? These camps never last. The boys dig in the ground and you sweat and eat dust and fight for the privilege. Then the vein tapers out and we go on to a new strike somewhere else and start again. Toward what?"

"Why, Lu!" Clane said, faintly surprised and having no answer for her at all. He felt for his money-belt and found it in place. He touched the side of his head and found a tight and throbbing lump over his ear. "Would you happen to know who hit me?"

SOMETHING went out of her green eyes and she said, "Ben went looking for you and carried you here. And came to the saloon to get me. Mister, why did you come to this camp?"

"Paul sent for me."

Her laugh was bitter. "That big stupid squarehead. What about your freighting business in Silver City?"

"I gave it to the boys who worked for me. There wasn't time to find a buyer. The ore is getting thin there anyhow."

"Mister—she had always called him that, putting into the word a certain something that was saved for him alone— "you're a fool!"

He was in Lu Starr's sunny kitchen, eating, when Ben Cornwall came limping in. The miner put a sharp regard upon him and then grunted.

"You've got a hard head. Any idea

who hit you?"

"A fairly good notion. Did you happen to see that Weston girl ride out of camp last night? Was a blocky-built hombre with her?"

Lu's sharp intake of breath was audible in the room. Old Ben said, "I noticed her. And he was with her."

Ben's eyes were asking questions, but Clane let them go unanswered. He said, "The idea was to delay me. I'll need wagons, mules, and men who can jerk-line an eight-span hitch. Have you got them?"

Old Ben's gnarled fist hit the table, making dishes jump. "Clane, that pass is like a fort, and if you try to bust through it they'll turn rifles on you and you'll get men killed."

"I'll get nobody killed—that's a promise, Ben. I aim for the pass to be wide open when I hit it. But meanwhile I want equipment lined up and men hired. I want things ready to roll."

Ben looked at Lu Starr. She lifted one gleaming shoulder. . . .

The ore wagons were big, with high, solidly built boxes and massive wheels eight feet in diameter.

"Bought 'em when we hauled Paul's stamps from a mill that closed at Wickenburg," old Ben said pridefully.

"Nine wagons," Clane said. "How many tons a day do we move?"

"A couple hundred. The ore shoots on the vein is rich in spots, middling poor in others. We're sorting—the high-grade that Paul can get pay out of goes in the bunkers and the rest goes in the big dump you see up there. Some day Paul will find a way to handle that, too."

Cornwall started making miner's talk about sulphides and silver dilution and recovery rates. Clane let it go by him, and looked up to the mine. He saw wheels spinning in the headrig and a plume of steam rising from the boiler. Lu Starr, with a woman's eye, thought that this led nowhere; a man looked at things differently. There was purpose here, and movement. Things got done. He said, "I'll need teamsters, Ben."

"They're workin' in the mine to keep busy."

"Mules?"

"Got 'em. I'll have a kid round 'em up for you to see. Dawn, you shove along too fast. I'm still buying you that drink."

They were in the Golden Stope Saloon, which was almost deserted now with the hardrock men on shift and underground, when the Mexican boy whom Cornwall had sent after the mules came running in with the end of his catch-rope trailing. He shuffled his bare feet in the sawdust and faced Cornwall, breathless but unspeaking. A Mexican kid did not speak first to his *patrón.*

Cornwall put down his glass. "What is it, Pablo?"

"The mules, senor! They are gone! They 'ave been drive off to the south, by four riders!"

Cornwall's face darkened. "Some dirty, Border-jumping sons!"

Clane said, "What direction is the Bar W outfit?"

"South. Ten miles or so." The miner's eyes narrowed. "Hell, you don't think that fool girl— What in blazes would a cow ranch want with mules?"

"It's a way of stopping us, Ben. Neat, and no bloodshed. I'll have a talk with the Weston girl."

CHAPTER III

Mule Rustlers

IT WAS late afternoon when Clane rode up to the Bar W ranch buildings. The big adobe house was placed solidly on the crest of a hill. A dozen horses idled at the porch, hipshot, tail switching at flies in the heat. Men sat on the steps, in chairs, and on the porch railing.

Stockmen. Their faces were browned by sun and wind and their hat-brims were turned up at the sides. They carried guns. They put a solid disapproval on Clane Lamont as he rode up and dismounted.

Ann Weston came down the steps. "What do you want here?" she demanded.

There was a vein of humor in Clane Lamont. It got free rein during his sprees—other times, in spite of the hard, driving work that made up his life, it cropped out now and then of its own accord. He touched his hat and smiled to the girl.

"Came courting," he said.

Color rushed to her face. For some reason she seemed thoroughly flustered by this. "Why, you—you—"

The man who hurried down the steps was not far past twenty-five. He had a smooth round face that showed a liking for easy living and the means to indulge it. "Ann, let me take care of him."

She pushed him aside. "I'll handle this without any help, Ron. Mr. Lamont, we don't like your jokes. We don't like miners—nor their freighter friends."

Clane said lightly, "Before you go reaching for a rifle, Miss Weston, I aim to do some talking. About the bunch of mules that was hazed away from Gazelle last night."

Her eyes widened. "What about them?"

"I want 'em back. Now."

The girl's anger had faded. She seemed perplexed. But there was a scraping of boots on the porch as men came to their feet. One lean oldster slapped the stock of his gun.

"Ron Gates, if you ain't man enough to put in for Miss Ann, I'll do it my ownself."

"Zack, please!" the girl snapped, over her shoulder. Then she said to Clane, "Do you realize what you're saying?"

He nodded.

"Well, I don't happen to be a mule thief, Mr. Lamont!"

He grinned at her. There was spirit in her; and an answering, reckless something was in his veins. "You've got mules that ain't yours. I followed the sign and found them tucked into a box canyon with a brush fence throwed across its end to keep them there. Bar W cattle all around that canyon, so I judge it to be your range."

Ron Gates licked his lips. The oldster on the porch snapped, "Ann, your pa never would of stood for this! He'd run those rock diggers out of the country before they poison all the water!"

Ron Gates faced around. "The Salado is Bar W water. It's Ann to say what's to be done. Maybe this poisoning was an accident."

"Now there," Clane said to the girl,

THE BIG MONEY

DID you ever stop to think what the prize money for a big Rodeo—such as the one held in Madison Square Garden in 1948, for example—amounts to in actual cash? Well, the prize money that year was $84,000.00. And to break that down, the purses for the Cowboys' Bareback Riding Contest, the Cowboys' Calf Roping Contest, the Cowboys' Bronc Riding Contest, and the Cowboys' Steer Wrestling Contest were $15,120.00 each. There were also varying amounts of prize money for the winners in other events.

These purses were not for one performance, of course, but were distributed among those who won top honors in various contests held during the run of the show in New York.

—William Carter

"is an hombre with a level head. You want to see those mules?"

"I certainly do! I'll get a mount—and my foreman."

She strode around the corner of the house. Clane swung into saddle and waited, listening to the rumble of the ranchers' voices but catching none of their angry, guarded talk.

The oldster whom the girl had called Zack came down the steps. He gave Ron Gates a brief look that told the younger man to stand out of the way, then he peered up at Clane. "You sit a horse uncommon easy," he snapped. "You've been a cowpunch, one time or another. Now you're with them water-poisoning sons, turned against your own kind. Why?"

"I've worked cows," Clane admitted, letting the question lie.

Zack snorted. "A blackleg. If Big John Weston was alive today— Oh, hell!" He turned and stamped away.

CLANE let him go. This was a council of war, with the ranchers primed for trouble. And Ann Weston, whose stock had been poisoned, was the one who was holding back. Perhaps because of Ron Gates' counsel, he thought.

When she rode past the house she was followed by Felipe O'Ryan. She made a gesture of impatient command to Clane. As he wheeled his horse he saw Ron Gates thrust a boot into stirrup, but the girl called, "This is Bar W business, Ron!" and Gates flushed and stayed where he was.

Clane and the girl crossed the range at a steady gallop, with O'Ryan keeping a respectful distance behind. Clane put a sidelong glance on the girl and saw that she rode with her slim body poised a little forward, moving in perfect rhythm with the stride of her mount. Her hair was blown back from her face by the wind and her shirt was pressed against firm roundness.

A shame, was his thought, for such a girl to try to put herself in a man's place.

She had noticed his glance. Color was again in her cheeks.

"You have a freighter's eye," she snapped. "It wanders."

"Where it pleases. Not often it sees a pretty girl running a cow outfit."

"You can forget the pretty girl talk, Mr. Lamont—it gets you nowhere here. My father built this outfit from scratch and fought through Apache raids and dry years, and years when you couldn't give beef away. I'm running it, yes. And it's not going to fall apart."

Pride, Clane thought. The same fierce pride that had goaded the oldster, Zack, at the ranchhouse. The pride of cattle kings—and in this case, a cattle queen. He said, "You had a bunch of old fire-eaters gathered on your porch. They make a pattern. Ron Gates doesn't fit it at all."

"Ron is like me. The second generation. He owns the Anvil, adjoining my range to the south. His father was killed by a bronc." Her chin lifted and, abruptly, she looked away. "Why am I telling you this?"

He grinned and said, "To convince me that this ain't a den of mule-thieves." He was going to jolt her now. He might get an answer to the question that underlay everything here. The question that wouldn't let him be. "You hate the Gazelle. Eli Voss has got the mine stopped, and that pleases you. But Voss is doing himself no good that I can see. There's two things that will make a man jump through that kind of a hoop. Money. A pretty face."

Her lips went taut. She pulled the .30-30 halfway from its boot, then let the weapon slide back. And then she laughed. There was something clean and mirthful and carefree about the sound of it. It was as if she hadn't laughed for a long time and now found pleasure in it.

"I suppose I should feel complimented, Mr. Lamont! Is it your guess that I piled money on his desk, or that I bought him with charm?"

Clane's mouth set stubbornly. She

had him feeling foolish now. Yet he had known the women of the gold camps and he no longer was surprised at anything. He said, "If I'm wrong, I—"

"You stupid, simple fool. Go back to your freight rigs and your honkatonk brawls. You're out of your class here. Eli Voss will cut you to pieces."

She put spurs to her mount and drew away from him.

The mules were in the box canyon. Ann Weston lifted her slim body on the stirrups and looked down at them, then she looked at the swarthy, impassive face of her foreman.

Felipe O'Ryan said something in rapid Spanish. Clane caught a word here, a word there. The foreman was saying that someone had brought the animals here to make trouble for the senorita.

"You will help Mr. Lamont drive them back," she said. Then she turned to Clane and spoke in English. "The ground between here and Gazelle is mostly rock. For a freighter, you did well to track them at all."

He grinned and shook his head. "You'll not toss suspicion back to me, girl. I didn't drive them here so I could accuse you of it. You're wrong about several things, and the poisoning of the Salado is one of them. It was cyanide in that water, and Reber has none of that stuff."

THE quick lift of her chin told him that his words had hit a solid wall of disbelief. "We are talking about mules. I have no idea how they got here. You will believe that?"

"We'll make a deal. You believe what I say about the poisoned water and I'll believe you about the mules."

But in quick exasperation she had whipped her horse with the rein-ends and was galloping away.

Felipe O'Ryan was helpful about removing part of the brush and hazing the mules toward Gazelle. But he was not communicative. Several times Clane tried to draw the man out, but got nowhere. With the mules returned to their scant graze in an arroyo near the mine Clane noodded to O'Ryan, then headed into the camp.

He felt the need of a drink. He had the mules he needed, but the trip had netted him nothing more. Except for a feeling of vague unrest. Riding across the girl's range, with the smell of dry grass in his nostrils and his glance falling upon bunches of grazing cattle had not been good for him. Yearnings, once carefully put away, were astir again. The old range life had been a quietly satisfying one.

He drank alone, letting the whisky warm his belly but getting little savor out of it. Lu Starr touched his arm. "You've seen her," she said.

He turned. Lu wore a dress that seemed woven from gold. Her mouth was red and there was a beauty spot on one cheek. Her green eyes were unsmiling. "Ann Weston," she said. "Ben told me you'd gone out to her place. Mister, she's not our kind."

"That's a fact, Lu."

She bit her lip. He measured the contrast between her carefully beautiful face and Ann's tanned features, which had charm of another sort. He turned slowly from her and peered at his own reflection in the backbar mirror. He saw an hombre with a hard line to his jaw. A stubborn down-turn at the corners of the mouth. A lurking reckless something in the eyes. A nose that wasn't quite straight any more—it had been broken long ago in a brawl.

A freighter. The ranch girl could not have judged him wrong. A man who made his way in the toughest parts of the frontier, in the toughest game of them all. It had put its mark on him.

Lu said, "I—I did some asking around. I found a Mexican who saw a man come out of the place where Ben found you. It was Ann Weston's foreman and she was waiting for him and they rode out together."

A bitter taste was in Clane's mouth. He had been rough with Ann Weston

and he had been regretting it. Now he wished he had known about this before he went to her ranch.

He said, "Thanks, Lu," and went out of Golden Stope.

CHAPTER IV

Who Is Paying?

CLANE arranged for the care of his horse at the livery corral and he rented a bunk in a sleeping tent operated by a Chinese boy who bobbed his head and said, "One dolla'!" to everything. He ate salt beef and stale potatoes and pie at a makeshift restaurant. Then he drifted along the street, smoking and letting his thoughts run where they would.

The Gazelle headrig was silent against the stars. Long since, the steam whistle had screeched and the cage had lifted the miners out of the earth. They had scattered through the camp, the few family men going to their mud huts and the rest going first to the restaurant and then to the saloon.

A hell of a life for any man. A cowhand or even a freighter had it better. His work might be hard, and dangerous at times, but at least he was out in the open with the sky over his head.

He crushed his cigarette under his boot and headed for Ben Cornwall's office.

Paul Reber was there with old Ben. The feel of disagreement was in the air. Cornwall was bent over the lamp, adjusting its wick to some whim of perfection, and Reber was sitting with his bristling blond head reared back.

"Now," Reber said, "he's here. We tell him what we think."

Cornwall said, "Paul figures to chase you out, Clane, before you hurt yourself."

Clane said, "The mules are back on their graze. I want them grained and I want a man posted to watch them. Tomorrow I'll want those teamsters."

Cornwall gave Reber a look that held triumph. Reber squirmed his big body in his chair. "Clane, I'll not buy it. You won't get through that pass. Voss has got five men up there now and he's got more he can throw into it if you make a try. They can fort up in the potholes and pick off your drivers. Or shoot the mules."

"You're building troubles in your head, Paul," Clane interrupted. "I've told Ben that I aim for that pass to be open when I hit it."

"How'll you get it that way?"

Clane grinned. A vague plan was forming in his mind but he meant to keep it there a while; mentioning it here would only set off a train of objections. He said, "That cyanide, Paul. Who around here would have use for the stuff?"

"Nobody! There's talk about a new process for ore milling that uses it, and gets all the gold instead of just part of it like mercury does. I'm trying to find out about that. But nobody's got cyanide here. Clane, couldn't you haul around the mountains, instead of going over Voss' road?"

Old Ben snorted. "We been over that before! It would cost more than we get out of the ore, the way we're milling it now. Damn it, there's more to mining than just getting ore out of the ground! Voss hit this camp broke and had to have advance money to start his road, and now he's all-of-a-sudden rich enough to tie us up and laugh at us. Who's footing the bill?"

"The way to find that out," Clane said sourly, "is to put pressure on him."

He tried out his teamsters next day. One man he fired on the spot—a stage driver who had open scorn for mules. The others, Clane figured, would do.

There was Dake Thorne, who had worked for Clane before—a big man with a smiling, battered face and an

oddly catlike walk. Arch Madden—a browned and wiry oldster whom the desert had cooked down to the essence of toughness. Six others, all with the look of seasoned jerk-liners about them.

ONE of them spoke his mind. "We hear a lot of talk about that there road, mister. Seems as though there's liable to be a gun-fight when we hit that pass. What we're drawing is freighters' wages, not gunfighters' pay. That right?"

"Freighters' wages," Clane said. "You'll head into no gun-fight that I can prevent. Today we're not hitting the pass at all. We'll pick our teams and pull the wagons to the ore bunkers and load up. Then we unhitch."

There was dust, and swearing and sweating and the cracking of whips, as the teams were formed up. The wagons rolled through the camp, with the drivers getting the feel of their teams and the big wheels trailing powdery adobe dirt. Clane's purpose in this was two-fold; he wanted the wagons loaded and ready to roll, and he wanted Eli Voss to do some worrying about the possibility that Clane might roll them at any moment.

Ore crashed down into the big boxes, at the Gazelle bunkers. One by one they were filled and with the mules straining against the long draw-chains they moved out to a fairly level spot where Clane had them bunched and unhitched.

Old Ben Cornwall came limping down from the headrig. "What's this, now? You don't aim to try any night run over that road?"

Clane shook his head. "When I pull out it'll be by daylight. Sit tight, Ben."

He walked down the hill, following the teamsters who drove their unhitched mules back through the camp. He didn't look at Eli Voss' office when he passed it. His mind was made up now.

He made his play that night, in the saloon. He sat at a table, drinking sparingly and listening to Lu Starr's songs, until a man whom he recognized as one of Voss' crew came in.

It was the man with the pock-marked face, the one who had stopped Clane in the pass. Clane got up and went to the bar and jostled the man's elbow, spilling his drink.

"Sorry," Clane said. "I'll buy you another."

The man's thin face was tight and his eyes were murky with held-in fury. Something had put an unaccustomed restraint upon him. He said, "Let it go. Voss, he might get particular about who I drink with."

"All right," Clane said. "You can take word to Voss for me. Tell him I'll be right here, all day tomorrow. He can come to me with a reasonable deal for the use of his road, or he can be out of camp by sundown. See that you make that clear—sundown tomorrow."

The gunman's eyes glittered. He ordered another drink and held it up, looking at it with obvious pleasure. "Now that's the kind of talk I like to hear. I been rusting away on this damn job." He downed the drink, wiped his mouth, and went out.

Clane headed back to his table. A dozen men had heard him lay it down. Now the word ran along the bar, faces turned to stare at him. Gold-camp legends had begun like this. One man put another on notice—get out of camp or fight. Generally the result was a clash that gave miners a topic of conversation that lasted them for years, and snowballed in color and detail as it went along.

Lu Starr came to Clane's table. She said, "You damn fool!"

Clane said wearily, "We've been over that before, Lu."

"We'll go over it again, mister! This is no freighters' brawl that you can batter your way through!"

"Let it drop, Lu. I've got to get Voss out in the open."

Her green eyes held a sick despair. "They'll kill you," she said in a whisper. . . .

Clane sat in the Golden Stope next

day. He played cards with Lu Starr. The game was watched by Arch Madden and Dake Thorne, who had chosen to remain close by.

It was nearly sundown, and Lu's face was drawn pale by tension, when Felipe O'Ryan entered the saloon. "A word with you, Senor Lamont," he said.

They went toward the bar, but O'Ryan waved away the man who came to serve them. "The Senorita Ann is outside. It is her wish to see you. Before we go, I warn you—I will kill the man who harms her. *Comprende?*"

Clane looked at O'Ryan's face and saw only a determined loyalty there. He shrugged, and smiled a little as he went out. Dake and Arch had stuck guns in their belts, and Lu was drawn tight with fear. And what Voss had done was send a woman and her watchdog!

Ann Weston was waiting on her horse. She wore levis as before, but now a white blouse gave her a touch of the feminine. There was a little color on her lips. She looked little like an imperious, hard-driving cattle queen. Something in her eyes made her seem girlish.

Perhaps, Clane reflected, that was a calculated effect.

She reined her horse around. "Walk beside me. Please."

They moved slowly out of camp, Clane striding along by the girl's horse and Felipe O'Ryan riding a short distance behind them. Clane was not unmindful of the chance that she was leading him into a trap. He kept his hand close to his holstered gun and his eyes scanned the rocks on either side.

But when they were clear of the camp she halted and said, "I'm curious about you. Zack said you'd been a stockman."

"No crime in that," Clane said.

She stiffened. "All right. You've chosen your way—and your friends. I want you to remember that I do what I have to do. The Salado is my only year-around water. If it is poisoned by that mine, I'm finished. Don't look so harsh. This fight means nothing to you, beyond a stubborn notion of loyalty to your friends. You'll not believe this, but Mr. Voss has proof that their mill poisoned the water. He says it will go on poisoning it, every day that it runs."

"A liar," Clane said flatly.

He was wondering why she had come here to tell him this. And why her eyes seemed to be trying to tell him more than her words did. Maybe it was in her pretty head to buy him off with girlish appeal.

A faint quiver caught at her lips. "I—I'll not plead with you. If you're going to keep on being blind and stubborn there's nothing that I can—" She choked up. In the sunset light her eyes glistened with sudden moisture. "Please, won't you drop all this?"

Clane's throat was tight. If this girl was acting she was mighty good at it. Something about her reached into a man, struck a chord of feeling, and left him shaken. He said, "Tell Voss I'm staying."

And now she was trembling and angry. She wheeled her horse and said, "Good-by, Mr. Lamont!" Then she was gone, riding away with Felipe O'Ryan close behind her.

Clane walked slowly back toward camp. He had wanted to tell her that he knew her foreman had been the one who attacked him that first night in Gazelle. He had wanted to say many things but hadn't got them even sorted out in his mind. The girl had disturbed him.

It was a strange thing.

But now the sun was down, the deadline was past, and he had to face Eli Voss. His stride quickened. And then a gun muzzle was jabbed against his back. Men who had risen out of the rocks were all around him.

The man behind Clane laughed softly, pulled Clane's gun from the leather, and tossed it aside. Another man loomed in front of Clane—a big man with red hair and a scarred jaw. He was laughing too.

"Now then, bucko," he said, dropping his gun-belt.

Clane knew this man. He was Bull Roark, who called himself a trouble-shooter, and was for hire to anyone who would pay his prices. A man who fought for money but found a bonus of savage satisfaction in battle. Clane's swift thought was that Voss and the girl were paying plenty for this.

Then Roark was hitting him. And the others were grinning as they watched.

CHAPTER V

The Deadline

NOT a chance did Clane have in this. Not with five armed men standing by to take it up if Roark failed. Clane took those first jolting blows, and he drove a fist into Roark's middle and got a grunt of pain and wrath out of the man.

This cleared his mind, somehow. This was Clane's style of doing a thing in which a man knew where he stood. He had been caught like a fool, with his head full of woman and his guard down. But he would make Roark pay for his fun.

A massive fist grazed Clane's head. He had seen the blow coming and had jerked to avoid it, yet it jolted him and spun him around and put him on his knees.

Roark made a sound of triumph and rushed in, swinging his fists. Either the man had knuckles of iron or he didn't care what happened to them, for he battered at Clane's head and the blows were like those of the big steam hammers that miners used to drill holes in rock. Pain put a red haze before Clane's eyes. He reeled dizzily to his feet, knowing that if he went down Roark would be on him with boots. Then this would be over and done with.

He lurched forward and put what strength he had left into the blows with which he hammered his opponent. His fist found Roark's mouth. Blood spurted. But Roark tucked his chin against one big shoulder and sidled forward. Hitting him was like hitting a wall.

But there was one break in the wall. Clane found it when one of his blows hit Roark's belly and drew, for the second time, a grunt of pain.

Clane battered at that weak point, driving in blow after blow in spite of the misery that Roark's frantic counter-blows sent through him. Roark was getting hurt now. His breathing was a gusty wheeze and his efforts to batter Clane down were becoming wild.

And then Clane heard the bellow of a voice that could only be Paul Reber's. "What in blazes is this? Why, you dirty sons!"

Clane looked past the reeling Roark and saw that Reber had come up the rise from camp. Now the big man was jamming a hand into the pocket where he always carried a gun.

One of Roark's companions lifted a rifle. Its report was a sharp splinter of sound, oddly like breaking wood. Reber's big body jerked and he went down.

Roark croaked, "You damn rattle-head!" at the man who had fired the shot. But then Clane hit him with new fury and Roark swayed and went down, twisting in agony.

It was like a signal. Instantly the others were on Clane with clubbed guns and pick handles. Something struck the back of his neck with a force that crushed the will out of him. Then he was on the ground and they were using their boots, and he knew that he was finished.

The quick mercy of unconsciousness wouldn't come. He tried to crawl away, and was blocked by Roark, who was on his feet again. Clane tried to give with the blows and lessen their force, but they came from everywhere.

Then suddenly the men were done with it. They were gone, leaving Clane

alone in the gathering dark.

He shook his head, not comprehending this, and struggled to his feet. He lurched toward Paul Reber. Swaying over the big man's body, he saw that blood was welling from Reber's chest.

Somehow he got the man up and across his shoulders. He staggered toward Gazelle.

They met him at the edge of the camp —Lu Starr, and Madden, and Thorne. The men swore and took Clane's burden from him. Lu got an arm about him, steadying him. She was crying.

"Doctor!" he croaked. "Get Paul to —doctor . . ."

HE ROUSED up in the bed and looked at Lu Starr. He rubbed the back of his neck and winced at the pain it brought. He said, "How many days, Lu?"

"Four," she said, regarding him with shadowed eyes.

"Paul?"

"Alive. The bullet went through him. The doctor says that if he can last through the week, he'll make it." She bit her lip. "Mister, let's get out of here. I can be packed in twenty minutes and I'll stake us to a buggy and a team and we'll put this camp behind us. Please!"

Clane grinned at her wryly. "Why Lu, what kind of bargain is this?"

Her red mouth trembled. "I guess my pride's all gone now. I'm scared, mister."

"Of what?" He shook his head slowly. "I've had beatings before."

"Not like this one. They nearly killed you!"

"I'm wondering what stopped them. Bull Roark was one of them." Clane was thinking that it wasn't Roark's way to stop when his man was down. Roark had had orders. The restraint they put upon him hinted strongly of a woman's notions.

Lu said, "We heard a shot, and were going out to help you when we saw you coming down the rise. We didn't see them at all. Next time, mister, they won't stop till they're done with you. Oh, you simple fool! You've got a heart in you that's as big as one of those freight wagons and you think everybody is as direct as you are and you let them lead you into a spot where they can hit you."

She was talking about Ann Weston now. And the fierceness in her green eyes was something he never had seen there before.

He said, "Let it be, Lu."

She looked quickly away from him. She said, "All right. I've got to sing the boys a song, if there are any of them in the saloon tonight. There's water on the table there, and whisky if you want it. Shall I put out the light?" At his nod she blew out the lamp. And then in the doorway she paused and asked, "Mister, is there something wrong with me?"

It was a strange question and it puzzled him. "Not a thing, Lu. Not a solitary thing."

After Lu was gone he lay motionless, staring up into the dark and thinking about Ann Weston. She did what she had to do, was the way she had put it. And what she had done was make herself feminine and let her eyes tell him things that stirred him, while she led him to the trap. There was guile in all women, and his mistake had been to lose sight of the fact temporarily. . . .

Two days later, when he walked through the camp, the ore wagons still were bunched near the Gazelle headrig. They represented failure; and the taste that it put in his mouth was not good.

He bought a gun in the Mercantile, to take the place of the one that had been taken from him, and went on.

The few men who were on the dusty street stared at him briefly, then looked away. That represented failure, too. A man who ordered another out of camp and then failed to back his say could only get out himself, if he lived to do it.

Pain still throbbed at the base of Clane's neck. He went to the office of Eli Voss and put his shoulder to the door but found it locked. Frowning, he

stared at it. Then he stepped to the window and rubbed grime from the glass and peered through.

The office was empty. Even the roughboard desk was gone. Clane stepped back and wheeled, still frowning, and went to Ben Cornwall's place.

OLD BEN was poring over ledgers and shaking his head. He jumped up.

"Damn! Lu said you couldn't be out for another week yet. How're you feelin'? She wouldn't let a man in to see you, even for a minute!"

"Where is Voss?" Clane interrupted.

Cornwall spread his gnarled hands. "Pulled out of camp."

"You mean the road is open?"

"No." Cornwall gave his head a shake. "Damn it, no. He's got his gunhawks guarding it night and day. He set himself up a place between here and the mountains, right next to his road. A shack that he calls a saloon. Serves all the boys free whisky and real steaks. They flock up there every night. I can't blame 'em any, when all we got for 'em is salt meat. The Golden Stope is just about finished, in spite of Lu's singing. The Gazelle is finished, too. We're broke."

He hadn't said that Clane had failed. He didn't need to.

Voss had actually improved his position, putting his strength near to the pass while giving himself the appearnace of avoiding trouble with the roistering freighter who had ordered him out of Gazelle.

Voss was treading carefully. But as before, one thing about it stalled Clane's thinking—there was no payoff in any of this for Voss. Even though her ranch was a big one, a foolish girl couldn't go on financing the man and supplying him with beef forever.

Old Ben was fidgeting. He said, "Paul and me, we both appreciate the try you made. Paul's pulling through. He was prowling around, worrying like he does, when he seen the Weston girl lead you out of camp. When you didn't come back he followed you and ran into that bullet. Now—" The hardrock man took papers from his desk. "We'll have a man drive you to Wickenburg. Here's a stage ticket and a check."

"Ben, I've never gone back over my tracks yet."

"Damn it, when there ain't a bit of use in a thing a man can't go on!"

"How long can you hold out?"

Cornwall shrugged. "We shut down tomorrow. That pay-roll has got us whittled to the bone."

"Can you borrow money to keep operating? I've got a little, but you'll need more."

"On a setup where we can't get a ton of ore to the mill? Hell!"

"Give me a week, Ben."

"What can you do in one week, or in a month of 'em? We're just plain stopped, and we might's well face up to it."

Clane said, "You didn't give up so easy, Ben, when you spent twenty years looking for the vein you've got here."

"There's a difference," Cornwall snapped.

"Yes. This time you don't savvy what you're fighting. I don't, either, but I can't see Voss blocking you just to please the whim of a fool girl who thinks you poisoned her stock. He has the look of a man who likes money—more money than she ever could pay him."

Old Ben's face hardened. "You saying he's after the mine?"

"It needs thinking about. What else is there here that's worth the sort of play he's making? Give me three days, Ben."

"Three days," Cornwall agreed wearily.

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CHAPTER VI

Fool Girl!

HOWEVER, no wheel turned at the Gazelle headrig the next day. Clane, who had spent the night shaping plans, climbed the hill to find out about that.

Ben Cornwall was putting a half-dozen men to the task of cleaning up spilled ore around the shaft collar. "Fireman didn't show up," he grunted, "to start the boiler. The rest didn't report either, except for these few. Not enough to make a crew underground. Takes your three days away from us, Clane."

Clane gave him a questioning look. "Where are they, man?"

Old Ben pointed with his chin. Clane looked, and saw men swarming over a ridge near Voss' new establishment. Sunlight glinted on swinging picks.

"He should stick to road building," Cornwall said. "That's country rock he's got 'em digging. He can go down to China and find not an ounce of mineral."

"He's hired himself a crew of miners," Clane said. "He's keeping them busy. It's beginning to shape a pattern, Ben."

Clane was thinking about it later, in the cool gloom of the Golden Stope, when Lu Starr said, "Voss has hired Ben's crew away from him." When he nodded, she said, "This stops you, mister. Doesn't it?"

He shook his head. "Voss has made a mistake."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He didn't do that hiring to get the men away from Ben Cornwall. He didn't need to do that, not with the road blocked and Ben not able to get the ore to the mill, and the pay-roll eating him up. No. Voss did it because he knows Cornwall is broke, and he doesn't want the men to start drifting away from here to look for work elsewhere. He wants to keep a hardrock crew on hand, to work the mine for him when he grabs it. He has tipped his hand a little this time."

"You're guessing, mister."

Clane nodded. "Call it a hunch. I'm wondering what the Weston girl will do when she gets it through her pretty head that he has used her money and her beef and made a fool of her."

"Clane!" It was the first time Lu Starr ever had used his name. It pulled his sharpened attention to her, and he saw the worry that was in her eyes. "My dad was killed in a fight over a mine," she said. "It wasn't his mine. There was no point in it at all, no reason for him to throw his life away just because he happened to be working for the man who owned it. They buried him on a hill after they blasted a grave out of solid rock. There's not a green leaf anywhere near there." Her lashes dropped. "A mine is just a hole in the ground, Clane. Not one of them is worth dying for."

"Lu, you do surprise a man," he said gently. "But there's something you've got to learn. Never try to stop a man in his work."

She got up quickly, catching her breath as if to say something in hurt and anger. But she faltered, and turned away.

Dake Thorne came into the saloon, moving with that light, catlike walk that seemed odd in so big a man. His face said that he knew the Gazelle was finished—and the hell with it.

"I'll buy you a drink, Clane." When they had downed the whisky he drew the back of his hand across his mouth and said, "I hear tell there's freighting jobs in Tucson."

"We're going through that pass, Dake."

"Now you're getting stubborn."

"I've had a beating. It makes a man stubborn."

"Did I say that was bad?" Dake's

face was wreathed by a carefully innocent smile. "I like an hombre that's stubborn. Did you, now, happen to decide what you was going to use for men to throw the lead?"

"You've been here longer than I have. You know the boys. There must be some you can round up who'd be willing to take on a risky job. Tell them the pay will suit them."

DAKE turned his glass and looked at it critically. "The word is that Reber and Cornwall are out of chips."

"Not their money, this trip. The boys will be on my pay. Tell that to the teamsters, too. Their wages are doubled, to help cover the risk."

"Makes a difference," Dake said. "I'll get the word around." He whistled cheerfully as he went out.

Clane had supper with Lu Starr that night. There was no business in the Golden Stope. Sitting around an empty saloon, she said, made her jumpy.

She volunteered a promise not to speak about Clane's work, and she kept her word. She smoothed an apron over her dress and gave him a brief, unreadable look, then set about preparing the meal in her kitchen.

They ate at a table in the patio, with a lamp hanging from a viga beam overhead. The meal was good. There were steaks that she had bought from an Indian who likely had range-butchered a Bar W critter, and fluffy mashed potatoes, and coffee and pie. She talked lightly of inconsequential things. Only once or twice did the shadow of worry show in her green eyes.

Clane looked at her and wondered what was wrong with him. She was his style of woman. Gaudy, yes. But always ready with a smile and a laugh and a come-back for a joke.

There were those who would judge her to be a tramp because she sang in saloons and matched the miners' rough banter. But the camps were the only life she had known, and there wasn't a man in them who didn't respect her.

She had helped Clane, and now she worried about him. On impulse, as she rose to clear the table, he turned her to face him and kissed her red lips.

It was a quick, light kiss. The gesture of a strong man who couldn't get into words the gratitude he felt.

Lu Starr knew it for what it was. She gave a quick sob and clung to him, hiding her face against his chest.

He heard the creak of the gate then. He turned his head and saw that Ann Weston had come through the patio wall and had halted there, shock lifting her chin and draining color from her face.

Then she whirled and was gone. The sound of rapid hoofbeats came from the street.

Clane darted through the gate. Except for a faint swirl of dust and the fading sound of hoofs the street was empty.

He went back. Lu tucked a handkerchief hastily into the low-cut bodice of her dress and faced him.

"That fool girl," he said. "I've got to talk to her. I've got to make her see that if she keeps on backing Voss she'll be finished."

"Mister," Lu Starr said, "you're in love with her. I've known it a long time. It was in your eyes when you came back from that ranch of hers."

Startled, Clane looked at her. This was a thing that he hadn't allowed himself to put into words. But he knew that Lu was right about it.

Slowly she removed her apron and smoothed her dress. She took a mirror from a pocket, looked at her mouth, and ran a fingertip along her lips.

"There's—something I've got to do," she said. "I'll be at Voss' place. The boys are up there and they're working. I've got a living to make, mister. I go where the money is."

CLANE wanted to go out to Ann Weston's ranch, but it would take most of the night for him to make the ride there and back. And he might not find her at home. Moreover, he had set things

in motion here. Dake Thorne would be reporting back pretty soon, and Clane wanted to be on hand to hear that report.

He waited in the Golden Stope, listening to the owner, Ed Kittle, bewail the sudden draining away of his business. Just after midnight, Thorne blew in.

"We lost two teamsters," he said. "They've taken a liking to the way Voss fills their bellies with bad whisky an' good beef, and it blinds them to the fact they owe something to old Ben. The others, they coast along on Voss' liquor, but they got no liking for that long face of his. My opinion is they'll stick when the cards go down. I got four others who claim they can handle a rifle if the pay is right."

Clane nodded. He was thinking that four men, some of whom might have been making only whisky talk when they said they could shoot, were not enough. But there was no time to send out to Wickenburg or Tucson for more. A man had to make out with what he had.

Dake put an elbow on the bar. "You know that Lu's up there, singing and smiling for the boys in general, and for Bull Roark in particular? That Roark, he ain't a lovely sight. You smashed his mouth, and he's talking mean and bragging what he'll do to you next time."

"He'll get his chance."

"Lu, she's putting her green eyes on 'im and prodding 'im."

A puzzled wonder stirred within Clane. The man who thought he could savvy a woman, he decided, was nothing but a fool.

He said wearily, "Let it be, Dake. We've got some figuring to do. We'll roll tomorrow. You and the boys will ride the wagons, instead of straddling one of the wheelers. We'll get some of those sheets of iron that they use at the mine for sorting ore, and put them up on either side of the drivers. They might not stop a bullet but they'll slow it down."

CHAPTER VII

In the Open

FOR two hours Clane and Dake built plans. And then Clane, suddenly tired and nagged by that ache at the base of his neck, headed out of the saloon.

He was moving slowly through the moonlight when Lu Starr stepped out of a shadowed doorway and said, "Mister."

He strode toward her, and what he saw put a feeling of shock into him. Her hair was in disarray and there was a bruise on her cheek. The bodice of her dress was torn. She held it together with her hand and looked at him, and the expression on her face was beyond his reach completely.

"I've got to talk to you," she said in a throaty half-whisper. "I—I didn't want those in the Golden Stope to see me. We'll go to my place."

When she led him into her little house there was a pause. In the faint light coming through the windows he sensed that she was pinning her dress. Then she lighted a lamp.

Her eyes held a feverish light now. "Roark boasts when he's drunk, mister. He told me plenty. Voss isn't just a road builder. He's a mining man, and he's got a new process for milling ore. It uses something they call cyanide. With it, Voss claims he can take millions just from those tailings that Paul and Ben have thrown away."

Clane's mouth tightened. His hunch had been right. Voss was looking far ahead, making a strained pretense of legality to avoid trouble later on, using Ann Weston's money.

Lu Starr was saying wearily, "That's all I could find out, mister."

"It's enough. I reckon I ought to marry you for this, Lu."

He said that lightly, his thinking not on the meaning of the words at all. And instantly he regretted them. The gladness that leaped and shone in her eyes, and then died there, was a thing that stabbed him.

Her laugh was bitter. "Do you think I'd let any man marry me out of gratitude? You fool! I didn't do this for you. I did it to square something with myself. Get out!"

He spread his hands. "Now Lu, I—"

"Mister, get out!"

When Clane entered his office next day, Ben Cornwall's eyes were dulled by hopelessness. "It's finished," he said before Clane could speak. "The doctor let me talk to Paul a while and we agreed on it. We're selling the Gazelle."

"For a deal like that, you need a buyer."

"Got one. Man by name of Malloy hit camp last night. Represents some big Eastern syndicate. We sign papers today."

"Not my business exactly," Clane said, "but how's the price?"

Old Ben grimaced. "About two bits on the dollar, for the equipment that's in and the development work that's done. Nothing for the vein nor for proved ore shoots. Malloy's sharp—he says the syndicate has got to figure on buying Voss off, and maybe a fight with the ranchers, before they can start getting their money back."

"This shapes it up," Clane said. "I'll send Dake over. When Malloy comes, grab him and hold him for me. We're rolling now, Ben. The whole thing's in the open."

The hardrock man stared. "Clane, what in blazes!"

"Listen close, Ben. I'm in a hurry and I don't aim to say this twice. I've found out where Voss stands. He's a mining man and he's got that new milling process that Paul was talking about. His claim is that your tailings alone are worth millions to him. My hunch says he's back of Malloy. He wants the Gazelle, but he wants it on a legal foundation so that no court will take it away from him later."

A gnarled fist hit the desk. "The dirty son!"

Clane grinned. "A little spirit. It looks good on you, Ben. With Paul out of it for a while, can we run that mill?"

"We can run it. But hell, man, I've got no miners!"

"You'll get them back. Meanwhile, Ben, there's one thing more. I made you a promise that nobody'd get hurt in this. I've got to withdraw that promise now."

CLANE left the office and moved along the street, striding with the hard sureness of a man certain of his course.

He found Dake Thorne scattering dried-grass Indian hay for the mules in the arroyo. "Get your boys together, Dake, and get the teams hitched. Have you got the steel on those wagons?"

Dake nodded, a slow grin lighting his face. "How soon do we roll 'em?"

"I'll let you know. Get those guards you rounded up. I want every man cold sober and ready at the wagons. When you've got them set, you go to Cornwall's office—he'll tell you what's to be done there."

Clane got his horse at the livery, mounted, and cut across cactus-studded foothill ridges on a course that carried him toward the mountains, roughly paralleling the wagon road. On the highest ridge he reined in and studied the pass.

He saw activity there. Men moved about, changing position in the potholes on both sides of the road. Those loaded ore wagons at the Gazelle still worried Voss. Now that the chips were down he guarded against a possible attempt at a break-through.

Bull Roark, his bulky figure unmistakable even at this distance, jogged down from the pass. He had placed his men and now he was going to report to his boss.

Clane touched spurs to his horse. He was waiting, at a point where the road dipped through a deep wash, when

Roark came down the pitch.

The trouble-shooter jerked in his saddle and gaped at the muzzle of Clane's drawn gun. Roark's mouth still was a puffed and clotted ruin. Hate leaped in his eyes.

"Drop your gun-belt," Clane said. "You'll not need it here."

With slow reluctance Roark obeyed. Clane holstered his own weapon, unbuckled the belt and hung it on the saddle-horn. "Get off that horse," he said.

Gladness leaped in Roark's eyes. He swung down quickly, and when Clane's boots hit the sand, Roark made his rush.

Clane was coldly ruthless in this. He took Roark's blows and he sledged that bull-like neck and he pounded Roark's middle, hurting the man and wanting to hurt him more. Sand spurted under their straining feet as they fought back and forth. Roark went down and Clane pulled him back to his feet and slashed his face with raking blows that jolted his head far back. The smell of blood was in Clane's nostrils now and he drove Roark before him until the trouble-shooter was backed up against the wall of the wash.

Rocks and dirt, loosened by the helpless movement of Roark's body, fell about their feet. Roark groaned and twisted and went down heavily, his face digging into the sand, and lay there.

Clane rested, breathing hoarsely. He picked up his hat. Then he boosted the unconscious man across his saddle. Leading the horse, Clane struck out across the ridges again, toward Gazelle.

He was dipping water from the mule-trough with his palms and running it over his head when Felipe O'Ryan rode into camp.

The Bar W foreman looked at Clane and looked at Roark, limp and unconscious across the saddle of the horse that Clane had led. O'Ryan's dark eyes remained flatly impassive.

"Senor," he said, "a word with you."

"Make it a quick one."

"This is not a proper place." O'Ryan nodded toward the Golden Stope. "I will buy for you a drink."

The liquor warmed Clane's belly and steadied him. Felipe O'Ryan regarded him for a long moment and then said, "The Senorita Ann makes plans for a *fiesta* at the ranch."

A THREAD of irritation tightened within Clane. O'Ryan's Mexican blood wouldn't let him come out with his say but made him circle around it a while.

"What's that to me?" Clane demanded.

O'Ryan shrugged. "Perhaps nothing. She will tell that she is to marry Senor Gates." He considered that, his swarthy face lined faintly with distaste. He spat into the sawdust. "It is not a good thing. A man who has greed, yet is soft. Senor, he is not one who is worthy of her."

Clane kept his voice down. "This is all you wanted to tell me?"

"But yes." O'Ryan looked at his empty glass.

Clane fought a rising urge to flatten the man. O'Ryan had come here with some perverse notion of goading him with this news. The Mexican blood in him was strong, and helped him sense the feelings that others kept below the surface. And the hell of it was, he was right. A crazy jealousy leaped within Clane now. He wanted to find Ron Gates and batter him.

And it wouldn't do. You could fight over a woman of the gold camps, yes. But Ann Weston would be repelled by it. Clane knew that he was in love with her. And that for him, a roistering freighter, she was as unreachable as the moon.

He wheeled and strode out of the Golden Stope. On a crazy, baffled impulse he led Roark's horse out of camp, made the long ride to the Bar W, and dumped the groaning trouble-shooter on Ann Weston's porch.

The girl came running to the door. She stopped there, gasping with shock and horror at the sight of the bloody

ruin of a man at her feet. Roark was stirring now. He rubbed weakly at the sand that had crusted with the blood on his face.

"Your hired man," Clane said. "You should have given him free rein, that time you led me out of camp to give him his whack at me. He's a warning, honey. You've picked the losing end of this deal. You've given Voss your money and your beef because of a fool notion that he'd stop the mine for you. Today, he's going down. You keep out of it, savvy? Having him on your string gave you the kind of advantage that you like, but he's all done now."

"Clane, I—"

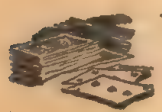
"Another thing."

Clane's voice was harsh now. This girl was tanned and clean as the range wind, and steadfast even when she was wrong. She would marry Ron Gates, and her love never would swerve even after she realized that he was unworthy of it. The jealousy that goaded Clane was something that refined people kept carefully submerged while they made their polite lies.

But Clane Lamont wasn't refined. He was a freighter. He said, "Your father would be proud of you now. Building the ranch bigger and bigger. That's what he lived for, and you're trying to fill his boots. Marrying another ranch is an easy way to get bigger, isn't it?"

He saw her chin come up in quick, quivering anger. Then he reined away, putting spurs savagely to his mount.

He had got the reaction he wanted. But he was hollow inside. There was no satisfaction in it at all.



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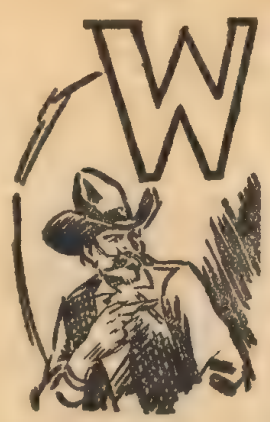
CHAPTER VIII

The Fight in the Pass



WHEN Clane rode into camp Ben Cornwall was limping along the street of Gazelle. The hardrock man was rubbing his knuckles. A grin pulled at his mouth.

"Dake and me," he said, "we got impatient. Malloy got persuaded to talk some. You had the thing figured right. He's Voss' man—skulked around here for weeks, waiting till Voss figured we was ripe for an offer. Voss poisoned that water to turn the ranchers against us and get the help he needed from them. It was Malloy that gun-barreled you, the night you first hit camp. He's tied up right secure, now."

"Malloy," Clane said. He had been sure that it was Felipe O'Ryan—Lu Starr had said so. More than anything else, that fact had put him on the track of Ann Weston's dealings with Voss. He shook his head.

But he saw Dake Thorne and four other men, all of them carrying rifles, waiting for him up there near the Gazelle headrig where the wagons were clustered and the teamsters were stringing out their mules. Clane had the men he needed, and now they were ready to roll. Arch Madden was up there with them, bossing the wagon rigs.

He wanted to see Ann Weston again and tell her that he had misjudged her on one point at least. But he couldn't go back. A man never could go back and ravel out the harm he had done. . . .

The men who crouched in potholes in the pass watched the ore wagons toil up the grade. They were nervous; Voss had kept preaching restraint and caution and had shied away from any showdown fight, and now it was coming anyway. This was evidence that Voss' plan-

ning had slipped up somewhere.

As the wagons came near, with the late afternoon sun back-lighting them, the guards saw that no armed men rode atop those loads of white quartz ore. Only man on each rig, jerk-line in one hand, whip in the other. Driving not from the usual position astride one of the wheelers but from a perch on the front of the wagons, where they had fashioned crude shelters with sheet iron.

The gun-guards relaxed. This would be easy; a matter of shooting lead mules to stop the rigs and then of picking off the drivers if they showed fight. There was no need for the crew of miners that Voss had armed with pick-handles and was holding in reserve.

There was no warning at all for these guards, until bullets struck the rocks beside them.

They jerked around, awareness that the shots had come from behind them and that they weren't forted for protection against this. And they saw Clane Lamont's crew. They had circled and climbed the pass from the east and now were above the guards.

Clane himself was on the road. He called, "Climb down, boys!"

The man with the pock-marked face chose to make his try. In a move that was frantically quick he brought his rifle around and fired at Clane.

And missed. The short-gun in Clane's hand was quicker of movement than a rifle, and the range was right. But no man could tell whether it was Clane's bullet or one from the rifles of the men who Dake Thorne had hired that spun the guard around and spilled him from his perch. He struck heavily on the road and was still, while the echoes of the gunfire drained out of the pass.

"Climb down, boys!" Clane repeated grimly.

They left their rifles and came down, stiff-legged with fear.

"Take care of these, Dake," Clane called over his shoulder. "Make sure there's no hideout irons on them and keep them here."

CLANE strode on, but in a moment Dake was beside him, matching his stride. Dake had left to others the chore of guarding the prisoners. In response to the look that Clane gave him Dake said, "Free country, ain't it? A man does what he likes—and right now I choose to take a walk down this road with you."

"All right. This is over and done with now, anyway."

"Voss is alive, ain't he? We ain't finished yet. I got the feel of it in my bones."

Clane gave a small shrug and went on.

The miners came boiling onto a long reach of the road then. A hundred of them, more or less. Far down the road they grabbed the jerk lines at the lead teams, halting the wagons. Nearer at hand a group of them made their rush toward Clane. They had mesquite clubs, pick handles, lengths of two-by—anything that would crack a skull—in their hands.

Dake Thorne's gun made a quick whisper of sound as it came from the leather, and a click as the hammer came back. Clane did not draw. He spread his boots and grinned at the angry faces of the miners.

"Leave it lay, boys," he called. "You're being used. You'll never see the high pay Voss has promised you. Working the Gazelle for him, you'd be driven harder than Ben Cornwall ever drove any man."

Their faces said that no part of his reasoning had got through. They were simple men, and Voss had fed them well on beef and whisky and promises. They stared, not at Clane, but at the gun in Dake's hand.

One said, "Put them shooting irons aside and we'll see how you back your talk, mule-skinner."

Clane grinned again. This was something solid, something in which a man could use his might. He unbuckled his gun-belt and tossed it aside.

"Dake, keep out of it. Now, any man

who thinks he can down me can step right up."

The shot came then. It made a flat and seemingly futile sound, but it put Dake Thorne down to his knees. As he struggled to get his gun up and squeeze the trigger a dribble of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Clane's glance whipped around and up, to the top of the ridge through which the road had been cut at this point. Voss was there, kneeling and levering a shell into his rifle for another shot. With a feeling of shock Clane saw that Ron Gates, certainly prodded into this at gun-point or by some other threat, stood near Voss. Gates' face was wild and he fired at Clane now and missed.

Clane dived for the gun-belt which, like a grandstanding fool who yearned to brawl in a freighter's way, he had thrown aside. The pattern of this was sharp and clear. Voss had taken Thorne, who was armed, and had left Clane for Gates to handle. And Gates couldn't possibly miss on his second shot.

The miners stood back, awed by the power of guns. Clane got to his belt and scooped it up, hearing more shots and marveling that he felt no impact of lead. He got the gun into his hand and let the belt fall and swung in a crouch, to face that ridge-top.

He fired, on a driving rush of anger, but it was a needless thing. Ron Gates was swaying before Clane's bullet hit him, and life already was gone from his eyes. When he went down he fell across Voss, who lay motionless on the ground.

Clane pulled his glance down to Dake Thorne and saw that the man was dead. There was a small wisp of smoke from the muzzle of Dake's six, and the hint of a smile on his relaxing mouth. Dake, then, had got off the shot that had put Voss down.

AND suddenly there were mounted men on the ridge. Cowboys, most of them Mexicans, on horses that carried the neat Bar W burn. Their guns moved in slow arcs to keep the miners

[*Turn page*]

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in check. But that wasn't needed now. Voss was done and it left the miners purposeless. They could only go back to the Gazelle and ask Ben Cornwall to send them underground again.

Clane stumbled up the rise toward Felipe O'Ryan who sat his horse and blew smoke from the barrel of his gun. "You stopped Gates," Clane said. "*Gracias*, hombre."

O'Ryan lifted one shoulder. "*Nada*. A long time ago I told you that I would kill any man who would harm the senorita. By marrying her he would do her greater harm than any other." O'Ryan spat. "He was a crawling one, senor. He let Voss stuff his head with dreams of the wealth they would get from the mine. Gates mortgaged his ranch, I think, to supply Voss with money. I know he supplied the beef. Always he was weak, scheming to make the gain without taking the chances. Many times the senorita refused to marry with him. I think she was not herself when she told him yes."

"Damn!" said Clane. He was thinking that he had been a thorough-going fool. He had hurt Ann Weston. His chances with her were nothing, and always would be. But he had to undo the harm he had done, somehow. "Felipe, I thought that girl—"

O'RYAN'S smile gleamed strangely. "A man can be blind about some things, senor, though he is alert in all else. I think the Señorita Ann waits for you now, in the gold camp."

When Clane reached Gazelle, riding the horse he had borrowed from Felipe O'Ryan, he found not Ann Weston but Lu Starr, sitting in front of her adobe house in a buggy. Boxes and suitcases were at her feet. She said, "Ann was all for going right up there, mister, but I kept her here and we talked."

"Lu, I've got to find her."

Lu nodded toward the patio gate. "She's in there. But wait a minute—I'll have my say before I go. She didn't know that Voss and Gates were after the mine. Not until you left Roark on her porch, and Felipe O'Ryan got it all out of the man. Then she savvied why Voss never had come up with the proof he kept promising her, proof that Reber's mill poisoned that creek. Roark was the one who drove the mules away and hid them where he figured you'd never find them. And Ann didn't lead you to him, the time he beat you. She didn't know he was following you. I—I think you'd better go to her now."

"Lu, where are you going?"

"I'm leaving Gazelle." She held out her hand to him. "Good-by, mister."

He took her hand, and found no words for what he wanted to say. "Lu, there's no sense in this. No reason for you to pull out." The words had an empty sound. They held hardly a hint of the gratitude he owed her.

"There are many reasons," she said lightly. Her eyes searched his face, and then she looked quickly away. "One of them is that I lied to you, mister, about O'Ryan hitting you."

"But why, Lu, why?"

"Never ask a woman to explain, mister. We all do things, and regret them afterwards. It's the way the world is."

Abruptly she whipped up the team. She held her head high as she drove down the street, with the buggy wheels spinning faster and faster in the dust.

Clane watched until the vehicle was out of sight. Then the patio gate creaked under his hand. Ann Weston came toward him eagerly. "You're not hurt. Oh, Clane, I'm glad!"

"Girl, I'm a fool. I thought all along that you were backing Voss, and it wasn't you at all." He stopped there, but she kept looking at him, smiling oddly and waiting for him to say more. And something deep within him strained toward her. "Girl," he began again, "I've got rough edges on me—"

The warmth in her eyes put a rush of feeling between them. "A foolish little worry, Clane Lamont," she said as she came into his arms. • • •

He bent, hauled the wounded Buchanan up to his shoulders

The Fight on the San Saba

By GORDON B. STRUNK

DAWN, November 2nd, 1831, San Antonio, Texas. In the pinkish glow of the coming daylight, a tall, husky man in buckskin looked over his small caravan, grinned in a satisfied and confident manner and waved his hand forward and down. The group of nine men and two young boys, along with several pack mules, headed north at a slow, steady pace. Spirits were high and the men were jocular, believing sincerely that when they returned, some months or weeks hence, they would be rich—in adventure as well as in pure, raw silver.

Jim Bowie had waited a long time for this. For many years he had endeavored to find the source of the beautiful silver which the Lipan Indians fashioned into ornaments, dishes, and with which they even decorated weapons. Bowie himself had even spent some time with the Lipans, winning their trust and friendship, but not to the extent that they would reveal the location of the fabulous silver mines. But Jim had learned

enough to believe he could locate it within a short time and now, with the aid of one Cephas Ham, who had spent two years with the Lipans, Bowie was certain of success.

Riding with Bowie was his older brother, Rezin, Dave Buchanan, Jim Coryell, Jesse Wallace, Bob Armstrong, Matt Doyle, Tom McCaslin and Cephas Ham, frontiersmen all, good men in a fight or frolic.

The group was well armed with rifles, horse pistols and the famous knives which Rezin Bowie had originated and Jim Bowie had made famous. They had mining tools, powder and shot and plenty of supplies for a long trip. They traveled leisurely, observing the terrain and enjoying the warm days and crisp, cool nights. They shot an occasional turkey or deer to freshen their diet and, though a guard was posted nightly they encountered no Indian sign the first sixteen days out of San Antonio.

Miners Meet Comanches

While making camp seven miles north of the Llano River on November nineteenth, the party was overtaken by two hard riding Comanches and a Mexican, who approached with hands held high in the peace sign. They identified themselves as members of a band camped on the Llano, led by Ysayune, a Comanche who had several medals which he proudly displayed to show his reward for peace with the white men. The Mexican explained that the band of Comanches were returning a bunch of stolen horses they had found and wanted to know how the San Antonio citizens felt about peaceful Comanches.

Since Jim Bowie's father-in-law was Lieutenant Governor of the Texas-Coahilla province, they accepted his assurance that San Antonio was friendly to honest men, whether Indian, Mexican or American. After an hour of pleasant palaver, the silver hunters presented the visitors with tobacco and powder and they rode away in peace and satisfaction. Bowie's party bedded down for the night, posting their usual guards. The night passed quietly enough. Sunrise found the men packing for another long day's march. The soft, beautiful quiet of dawn was broken by the approaching sound of flying hoofs and the startled men watched the Mexican who had visited the evening before come pounding into their camp, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Many Indian follow you!" he shouted in alarm, "Over hundred twenty—some Caddo, some Waco, mostly Tehuacana."

Bowie frowned, puzzled. "What for?" he asked. In answer the Mexican made a significant circle about his scalp. The men exchanged grim glances and listened to the Mexican's account of the discovery. The Indians had visited Ysayune's camp, telling him of their intention of exterminating the band of white men. They paid no heed to his pleas that it was a peaceful hunting party. They were in a bad humor and spoiling for blood, and Ysayune, seeing that he had not prevailed with them, had sent the Mexican post haste to warn the white men to flee.

He advised them to return to the Llano River camp where he would combine his own small forces with the white men's, hoping to discourage the war party. Ysayune had only sixteen men in his party and Bowie and the others held a council to decide their next move, which might be the one which determined whether they were to live or die.

"I can't see going back." Bowie shook his head. "The few more we could add wouldn't do much good out there in an open fight. But I'm certain that we're within twenty-five or thirty miles of the old San Saba Mission. If we can make it, we could hole up inside the walls which are still standing, and hold off a small army with the powder and shot we're packing. What do you say?"

The men looked at each other searchingly, then quickly nodded in unison. They thanked the messenger and re-

layed their gratitude to the friendly Ysayune; then hastily packed and pushed on. The progress was slow because of rocky, rough terrain, and by mid afternoon, a couple of the horses had pulled up lame. With only an hour to go until sundown, they found themselves on the banks of the San Saba and it was evident to all that they would not be able to make the shelter of the San Saba Mission that day.

There was nothing for it but to choose as protected a shelter as possible and fortify themselves for the night. Seeing little to encourage them in the near vicinity, they crossed the river and pushed north, desperately trying to locate a defendable position before night fell.

Three miles north, just as the sun was dipping below the horizon, they came upon a clump of live-oaks. There were thirty odd trees, each with a trunk rounder than a man's body and it was here they chose to hole up for the night. To the north, the grove was flanked by a thicket of bushes about ten feet high and thickly clustered; additional protection to the small group. Forty yards to the west ran a small, clear stream, and to the north was a sharply rising hill, skirted by timber. Bowie cast a worried eye upon the elevation, knowing it would provide ideal shelter from which to launch an attack, but with darkness now closing in, they had to risk it.

While the two boys hobbled the horses, the men set about to prepare for whatever the night might bring. At Rezin Bowie's suggestion, they took axes and cleared a wide path ten feet inside the thicket. If attacked, they could crawl in and be well protected and hidden while still being able to see out fairly well.

Await Indian Attack

As dark fell, the Mexican boy, Gonzales, and the colored youngster, Charley, set out jerked venison and water which they had gotten from the nearby creek. Cephas Ham and Matt Doyle took their rifles and set themselves on the first watch while the others retired to their buffalo robes to get what sleep they might. That the Indians were following them, none doubted. These men were seasoned plainsmen and Indian fighters, and wise to the ways and moods of the red raiders. Once a band of young bucks have been stirred to blood lust, the silver hunters knew nothing short of their goal would halt them.

But the night passed without incident or a sign of their followers. At sunrise, the men packed quickly, quietly congratulating themselves on their good luck. Evidently they had lost the scalping party. In a few more hours at the most, they would have reached the comparative safety of the old mission.

The pack animals loaded and the men mounted, Rezin Bowie glanced back over the back trail and his jaw dropped. His voice came almost automatically, "Indians! They're here! Back into the trees and thicket!"

Coming across the open prairie to the east, two hundred yards beyond the grove, was a huge mounted band of Indians, led by a tracker who was afoot and several yards in front of them.

Quickly the men tied the animals in shelter and grabbed their rifles. The Indians also prepared for battle. They began discarding surplus clothing, a custom when anticipating a close encounter. A few circled close to take stock of the situation—close enough for Cephas Ham and Jim Bowie to make out their markings.

"Wacos, all right." Ham confirmed the Mexican's warning, "but mostly Tehuacanas. Looks like we're in for it, all right." The men nodded grimly, rifles acock, senses keenly alert for the charge they knew would come.

"That Mexican was short a little in his count," Jim Bowie said, squinting carefully at the band. "There's close to a hundred and fifty Indians out there." Unconsciously, the men counted their own small party. Nine fighting men, two very young and very frightened boys, to pit themselves against this overwhelm-

ing horde of savages.

"Listen, boys," Rezin advised calmly, "We'd better try to make peace with them, if we can. I'll go out and ask for a parley with their leader. Maybe if we can pick the right words, we can avoid a slaughter. Buchanan, you speak Caddo pretty fair. Will you go along?"

"I'm with you." Buchanan answered quietly.

"All right." Rezin nodded and rose. "Jim, you and the rest keep us covered. At the first sign of anything queer, pour it on as fast as you can for a couple of minutes to give us a chance to run back here."

The men ranged themselves strategically, eyeing the distant Indians sharply, rifles trained as Rezin and Buchanan stepped cautiously into the open. They advanced slowly, stopping some forty yards away from the front ranks of the Indians. Buchanan spoke loudly in the clipped jargon of the Caddo tongue, asking for a peace talk with the leader.

Wacos Begin Battle

A brief silence met them. Suddenly a Waco shouted loudly and derisively the only English he knew: "How-de-do! How-de-do!" It acted as a signal, for the entire band broke into fierce yells and several front rank horsemen kicked their mounts into a charge headlong at the two men standing alone on the prairie! Others knelt and fired their muskets and with the first volley, Buchanan tumbled to the ground, his leg broken by a ball.

Rezin quickly fired his double barreled gun and emptied his pistol at the charging Indians; then cursing softly, he bent and hauled the wounded Buchanan to his shoulders and headed at a staggering, strangely comical trot back for the cover, his burden's blood saturating him.

Angered because their first fusilade had failed to down the men, eight Tehuacanas broke from the group, coming on foot, brandishing tomahawks and yelling lustily. It was obvious that Rezin would never make it back to cover before they overtook him, nor could he put Buchanan down and reload.

Out from the trees came four Texans, shouting as fiercely as the redskins! Jim Bowie, Ham, Coryell and McCaslin charged straight for the pursuing Indians, Jim yelling, "Don't miss, boys! Don't miss!"

They stopped, knelt and four shots lashed out from the Texans' rifles. Four of the Indians fell. Impressed by the accuracy and deadliness of this shooting, the other four hastily retreated to their band, as the Texans pulled their pistols and fired at their backs.

Meantime, Rezin Bowie had gained the shelter of the trees and had deposited the profusely bleeding Buchanan on the ground and was attempting to staunch the flow of blood while the others reloaded quickly to stave off any attempt to cut off the four men out on the plain.

Bowie set the break as best he could, bound it with his shirt and made Buchanan easy. Buchanan had suffered two other slight wounds, but they were scratches. He had clung to his gun throughout, and this Bowie now entrusted to Charley, the young mulatto.

The four men came crashing back into the thicket and the Indians, evidently deciding to use strategy rather than a frontal assault, retired to the shelter of a thicket some distance away. For several long minutes, complete silence reigned out on the plains.

"They're probably heading around the hill," Jim surmised aloud. "In a couple of minutes we'll be hearing from them."

His prediction came true a few moments later. Over the brow of the hill swooped half a hundred whooping, shooting Indians. Throwing caution to the wind, they boldly knelt to fire, pouring shot after shot into the trees. The defenders heard the bullets hit the trunks, but none of the slugs found a live mark.

"Shoot carefully, boys, and make ev-

ery shot count," Bowie cautioned, sighting down his rifle barrel at the chest of a huge, wildly painted warrior seated on horseback at the top of the hill. His rifle spat and the Indian threw his arms wide in a dramatic gesture and fell heavily to the ground.

Volley Greets Hostiles

Following Bowie's example his companions also fired and five more Indians went down. The men were not naive enough to be exuberant at this. Instead, Jim cautioned them again.

"Aim carefully, and make a good showing. If they charge us now, we're out of luck, but we can't let them guess that."

Over the brow of the hill rode a chief of some sort, mounted on a pinto. He rode back and forth among the half concealed Indians, obviously exhorting them to charge.

"Whose gun is loaded?" Bowie asked quickly.

"Mine," Cephas Ham answered.

"Then knock that buck Indian off that horse, and make a good job of it."

Ham raised his rifle, taking careful aim. As he fired, the pinto went down and the chief with him, but the chief bounced gingerly up, dragging one leg and holding his hide warshield before him as if to ward off more shots. The other rifles of the treasure hunters were reloaded by now and a shot quickly finished off the chief, while three more went down at the next volley, while attempting to recover the chief's body.

This decided the issue for the moment and the Indians quickly scrambled back over the hill. Within a few moments, however, they came back, this time bringing the bowmen. Now a hail of arrows fell, interspersed with lead, and the Texans settled into a methodical pattern of firing, reloading, firing calmly and with deadly accuracy.

Another chief appeared, endeavoring to excite his followers into a charge, but Jim Bowie, with a remarkable shot, dropped him from the horse dead, and his comrades hastily hauled his body out of sight.

Under cover of all this, a small band of Tehuacanas had sneaked to the cover of the creek bank, and now, from a new quarter, firing broke out from a distance of less than forty yards! The first volley caught Matt Doyle, the ball passing through his breast and out his back. He fell into the arms of Tom McCaslin, who was, incidentally, his lifelong friend and companion. McCaslin made him as easy as he could, meantime seething with vengeful rage.

"I'm going to get that Indian who shot Matt if I have to crawl out there and kill him barehanded," he snarled savagely, loading his rifle.

"Keep down!" Jim Bowie shouted. "They've sent sharpshooters out there to the creekbed. Keep down!"

But McCaslin was already standing up, searching savagely in the brush lined bank for a target. He spotted a faint movement, raised his gun and sighted, but before his finger tightened on the trigger, a shot rang out and a ball cut his heart in two!

Armstrong waited, hoping for a shot at the Indian who had got McCaslin, and spotting him, was aiming when a ball smashed through his rifle stock, stunning him momentarily and sending him kicking. Recovered, he finally did put a ball through the head of the marksman who had killed McCaslin, a few moments later.

One Texan dead and two seriously wounded. Six actual fighters now against well over a hundred angered, determined and blood-thirsty Indians.

"Boys, concentrate on cleaning out those sharp-eyed snakes in the creek bed and then we'd better retire to the swathe we cut in the thicket and dig in. It's our only chance now." Inside a half hour, by careful shooting, they had evidently accomplished their purpose, for no more shots came. Quickly they transferred their wounded and their equipment into the shelter of the thicket.

Too late, the Indians now discovered themselves to be at a disadvantage, for they would be forced to attack this new position from the open plain, and all too well they knew the deadly marksmanship of the stubborn defenders would account for many more of their numbers before the redskins penetrated this clever barricade. Earlier, two short, fierce frontal attacks had been repulsed with a loss of sixteen Indians and they had abandoned this plan. Now they had no choice. The white men could see them but they could not see the whites. Knowing this, Bowie's little band took heart somewhat, though they knew it did not alleviate the tremendous odds against them.

So the Indians tried a new trick. Several of them crawled far out on the prairie, while sharpshooters waited till a Texan fired, then shot instantly at the smoke puff. The attackers scored once with these tactics, Jim Coryell stopping a ball through the fleshy part of his upper arm.

"Fire and roll a couple of feet away before you reload," Bowie directed the men. Several times during the next few hours the men saw dust spurt from the spot they had just occupied and this maneuvering doubtless saved the expedition for the moment.

Just before noon the Indians sprang a new and more ominous trick. Flames appeared in the grass out on the prairie, and the men saw quickly that the wind had shifted imperceptibly and would now sweep the flames into the thicket very shortly. The smoke began to choke and half-blind the men in the thicket and, for the first time, hopelessness mingled with grim determination in the eyes of the defenders. But suddenly fate seemed to take a hand for the fire died out with the wind.

"They're bound to come now," Jim Bowie prophesied solemnly, "and if they do, they'll have us. All we can do is sell out dear."

"Looks that way," Rezin Bowie agreed glumly, his thumb caressing the hammer of his gun. "I'm sorry we brought these boys into this with us, Jim."

"Don't be worryin' none about us," Ham spoke out quickly. "Whatever happens, it's been a right enjoyable fight—one of the best."

The expected charge never came, however, and about four in the afternoon, when the smoke cloud lifted, the Texans saw the reason why. The Indians had been too busy removing the bodies of their dead. They were now marking time, visible far out on the plain, out of range, roaming restlessly about like disappointed coyotes, plotting new strategies.

Build High Barricade

Taking hope again, Jim Bowie instructed Charley and Gonzales to chop out a huge circle in the very center of the thicket and to begin to throw up a breastwork of limbs, dirt and debris around it after transferring all the equipment and the wounded inside. This done, he surveyed it and his pathetic band with satisfaction.

"At least we can make a battle of it here," Bowie gloated. "They'll pay heavy to take us now."

Suddenly Armstrong yelled and pointed toward a stealthy figure crawling quickly along the prairie with a blazing firebrand. Obviously the savage intended to approach close and re-light the grass near the thicket. Armstrong knelt even as he shouted, aiming, but the Indian, warned in advance by the yell rose and tossed the brand as far ahead of him as he could, then turned to run. Armstrong's rifle ball caught him squarely in the middle of the back, but the damage was done. The grass quickly sprang into flame and the men's faces fell as they noted that the wind was once more blowing into the thicket.

The second fire burned far more quickly and fiercely than the first and, as dusk fell, it reached the camp. Hundreds of burning twigs floated about in

the smoky dusk, like fireflies, and now Bowie saw a new and deadly danger.

"Don't try to load!" he warned the men sternly. "If a spark gets into an open powder horn, you'll go higher than a buzzard." He shouted to the two youngsters to get robes and blankets and beat out the flames which had commenced to lick closer in the thicket, and to wrap some wet cloths about the wounded men's faces. The scared boys set about the job with a will born of desperation and succeeded amazingly well in keeping the fire from actually penetrating the inner circle, sometimes by digging up clumps of blazing grass with their bare hands.

As complete darkness set in, the fire burned itself out at the edge of the pathway the men had cut ten feet inside the thicket, though myriad sparks still floated about and the pall of smoke was enough almost to suffocate the men in the tiny barricade.

"Well," Jim said slowly, drawing his big knife and testing it with his thumb, "they'll surely come now. And we still can't use our rifles on account of those sparks. Reckon we'll have to dig in and make our last stand with knives and hatchets and fists."

Buchanan Suffers Greatly

Armstrong crawled out and filled two of the waterbags and, though fired upon, returned unharmed.

"You know, Jim," Cephas Ham mused, "them redskins don't like to fight after dark. They're superstitious about bein' killed at night—they think their spirit roams in darkness forever then. I got an idea they won't come tonight, but—" he sighed grimly, "—we'd better be ready for all hell in the morning!"

It had now been thirteen hours of combat for the two forces, and Bowie's men were weary, tired in body and mind. But they worked more on the defenses, strengthening the barricade, making it shoulder high, piling on dirt and sticks until almost midnight.

Buchanan, though conscious, was feverish and in severe pain. Matt Doyle, shot cleanly through the chest, amazingly enough was in fairly good condition. Coryell's arm had stiffened, but he reckoned he could still manage a fair fight in the last melee.

Little could be done for the wounded, at least until daylight, except to ease them as much as possible.

At midnight Gonzales again served jerked venison and water, and though meager, it was welcome and filling to the men. Their nerves were too jumpy for sleep, and all night they lay on their arms, ears cocked for the slightest sound from the prairie. As the moon rose, the eerie sound of the Tehuacanas wailing their chants over the dead drifted to their ears from far out on the prairie.

At last the prairie began to lighten and grow from green-gray to dull pink and Jim and Rezin Bowie crawled cautiously out into the open in order to reconnoiter.

Not an Indian was in sight.

So peaceful did the prairie seem that the bloody battle of the day before seemed like it had been a dream, rather than stark reality. Venturing farther out, the Bowies still found no sign of an Indian, alive or dead, though they counted over fifty bloody stains where the Indians had camped briefly the day before.

Returning to the thicket, Jim ventured an opinion.

"I'd guess, off hand, they had about thirty dead and maybe about forty wounded. They didn't leave a single body out there. I guess that's why they haven't attacked this morning—they're too busy buryin' their dead. Probably a mile or two north."

Taking stock, the little band found itself in bad enough shape. They had three horses killed and five more hit, and now they buried McCaslin in the grove where he had fallen. One dead and three wounded left their forces pitifully short. Having no medicine, Rezin Bowie boiled liveoak bark and mixing it with

charcoal and Indian meal, made a poultice for Doyle's chest and Buchanan's leg, binding it tightly by sewing a buffalo skin on.

Jim rigged up a banner from a red shirt and hoisted it defiantly on a long pole to signify that there was still fight in the little garrison. At noon, fourteen horsemen appeared out on the far edge of the prairie. They halted and studied the tiny fortress carefully for several moments, then disappeared.

Miners Stay Hidden

The mining party remained in the thicket eight days, constantly keeping a huge fire burning to attract the attention of friendly Comanches, but none came. Buchanan and Doyle slowly gained strength enough to travel and on November 29th, the bedraggled little band finally ventured forth on the return to San Antonio. Several times they came across Tehuacana trails, but they swung around any possible danger, having had enough Indian fighting for the present.

On December 6th, they made San Antonio in good condition. The wounded men recovered eventually, despite the crudeness of their medical attention.

His dream of silver riches blasted for the time, Bowie reluctantly bade goodby to his hardy band, Rezin returning to Louisiana and obscurity. In his report to his father-in-law, Jim Bowie estimated they had killed twenty-one Indians and possibly wounded thirty odd. He listed seven of the dead as probable chiefs of some sort.

Weeks later, Comanches brought in the true count. The whole western Indian country buzzed with the tale, the Comanches reported. Only then did the men find that in that furious battle, one of the bloodiest in frontier history, there had been fifty-six Indians killed and thirty-two wounded—eighty-eight casualties as against one dead on their side—and this with the odds against them of one hundred fifty to nine!

Jim Bowie vowed to return and search for the fabulous mines he was certain existed, but history was waiting for him to take his place in the ranks of the heroic Alamo defenders, and to this day, the secret of the lost Lipan mines remains nestled somewhere along the San Saba, buried under history and time.

THE RIO KID AND HIS FIGHTING PARDS ARE

AT THEIR BEST IN—

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The crowd was silent, watching with awed eyes as Rick clung on

FREE FROM FEAR

By GILES A. LUTZ

Father and son face an emotional battle together

THE TOWN was festive with flags and bunting and gay with the holiday spirit. The big bunting, hanging over the middle of the street, had large letters on it, and Jimmy Taylor painfully spelled them out in his mind. Even with letters that large, spelling doesn't come too easily to a ten-year-old. The letters said, "World's Biggest Ro-

deo," and Jimmy said the words over again in his mind to fix them there.

He looked up at the tall, thin man, walking beside him, and asked, "Is it, Dad?"

Even the bad knee didn't slow Rick Taylor too much. Jimmy had to run a few steps every so often to keep up with him. Rick stopped and frowned at the too-thin boy with the big eyes. Jimmy had long, good bones, but the flesh simply wouldn't stick to them. He had his mother's eyes, trusting eyes, unshadowed in their complete belief in Rick.

Rick started on again. He either hadn't heard Jimmy's question or had already forgotten it. Jimmy tugged at his hand. It happened that way too often now. He patiently repeated, "Is this the World's Biggest Rodeo?"

Rick's grin was just a parting of the lips with no particular degree of humor. Jimmy could remember back when Rick used to laugh a lot, but that was before Jimmy's mother died.

Rick ruffled his son's hair, and Jimmy squirmed delightedly under the lean, hard hand. These were the moments he lived for, these tight, breathless flashes of intimacy when he felt everything was right between them. Such moments were like Rick's laugh—they didn't come too often any more.

Rick said, "Let the old home-town strut a little, Jimmy. Though I've seen bigger rodeos." His eyes had a queer, haunted look as he asked, "Don't you remember some of the crowds you used to see?"

Jimmy's brow wrinkled with the concentration of remembering. Yes, he could recall great banks of cheering people, but that had been three years ago, and it was hard to make any of the details come clear. But he could remember those people cheering Rick, then suddenly all the cheering people were gone. They disappeared after Rick got out of the hospital, and Jimmy never did know if the two things were tied together.

The bunting and the flags and the sight of all the colorfully dressed cowboys got into Jimmy's blood, and he said happily, "You were the best bronc rider in the world, weren't you, Dad?"

"No," Rick said harshly, and started off again. He walked with a stiff, dragging step, the right knee refusing to bend properly, but still Jimmy had to run to keep up with him. He saw the savage, twisting look on Rick's face, the look that made him ache inside without understanding why. "Hey, Dad," he panted.

Rick glanced back and the look faded from his face. "Sorry, Jimmy," he said, and slowed his pace. "I guess we picked a bad time to come back. I didn't know this rodeo was going on."

JIMMY didn't think it was a bad time at all. The town was filled with laughing, happy people. Everyone was yelling to everyone else and having fun. He wondered why people didn't have that laughing note in their voices when they called to Rick, why they sounded stiff and guarded.

And he wondered about that look on Rick's face. Maybe Rick had fears about returning to this town, just as Jimmy did. Jimmy never talked about that fear, for it was something he couldn't put into words. But the thought of Pudge Ferrell was like a big, black cloud coming up on a clear day. But maybe in the four years since he had been here Pudge had moved away. Jimmy hoped so, and he felt a secret shame at the fervency of the thought.

A fancy-dressed cowboy came out of the store and stopped on the walk ahead of them. Jimmy remembered his face, but he couldn't think of his name. What an outfit the guy had on! His white hat was big and set at exactly the right angle, his shirt took Jimmy's breath away, and his boots had intricate patterns hand-stitched into them. Jimmy could see his face in their polished surfaces.

By contrast, Rick looked like a bum, and the disloyalty of the thought was like the pricking of a sharp pin. But

Jimmy couldn't get rid of the thought or deny its truth. Rick's hat was battered and drooping. His cheap plaid shirt was wrinkled and not too clean, and the jeans had seen long, hard service. The boots were scuffed, their heels run over. Jimmy jerked his mind from the painful inventory.

Rick stopped and turned his back. He rolled a cigarette, and his hands were shaking. Jimmy suddenly knew Rick didn't want that man to see him. Rick hadn't shaved since yesterday morning, and the beard was a heavy black shadow on his face. It didn't hide the hollows in his cheeks, though, and it made his eyes seem hungrier and bigger.

It didn't do Rick any good to turn his back. Jimmy saw the cowboy stare at Rick, saw the grin break out over his lips. It wasn't a pleasant or friendly grin.

The man came forward and slapped Rick on the shoulder. It had more force than a friendly slap should have. Jimmy saw Rick's shoulder buckle under it.

"Rick Taylor," the man boomed, and people as far away as a half-block, heard him and turned their heads. The voice was like the clap on the shoulder; it carried too much force.

Rick's face was a white, blank space above the black of his whiskers. "Hello, Cleve," he said in a flat, dead voice.

Jimmy remembered Cleve Hawthorne then. He used to hang around the house some, whenever Aunt Lynn was there.

Hawthorne said loudly, "Don't tell me the Champ came back to compete against poor little we'uns." He said it with a sneering note, and Jimmy found himself flushing, just as Rick was flushing.

Hawthorne went on, "The last we heard of you, you were running. Now won't it be kind of funny, if you think the running is over."

Jimmy saw Rick's fist bunch, the knuckles standing out sharply white. Then the fist opened, and the hand hung limp at Rick's side. He said slowly, "I didn't come back here to compete. I got an offer for my place. I think it's time to sell." He took Jimmy's hand and said, "Be seeing you, Cleve."

He literally dragged Jimmy down the street. He didn't stop until he turned a corner, then he leaned against a wall and briefly shut his eyes. His face looked hurt and miserable, and Jimmy gulped hard against the trembling of his lips.

He said fiercely, "I don't like him, either."

Rick opened his eyes and grinned wearily. "Don't go getting yourself worked up. There's nothing between Hawthorne and me. I used to ride against him in a few rodeos." His voice took on that flatness again. "I hear he's got to be a lot better since then."

He grimaced and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a half-dollar and said, "Catch." He spun the coin into the air.

Jimmy smothered it in both hands, his eyes glistening. "Can I spend it the way I want to?"

"Any way you want to."

Jimmy couldn't remember too many half dollars to spend in his life. A few times there hadn't been enough money to buy food. They used to make a game out of going hungry. The one who complained about it first lost. Rick never could hold out for long. He would rub his stomach and say groaningly, "I'm hungry."

IT WAS pleasant remembering the little game, particularly with all this wealth in his pocket. Jimmy broke down the street, then stopped fifty yards away and looked back. Rick hadn't moved, and that frozen look was still on his face. Jimmy had the uneasy feeling the half-dollar was to get him away, to keep him from seeing Rick meet any more people like Cleve Hawthorne.

He wanted to go back, but Rick shook his head. Jimmy turned and went on down the street. But some of the gaiety was gone, and he didn't run.

He stopped in at an ice-cream parlor, and it took a time to make up his mind.

He thought of a banana-split, but that would take almost all his half dollar. He settled on a chocolate soda, and the straw made a loud, slurping noise as it sucked up the last drop. He debated a moment, then brought a three decker ice-cream cone, each mound being a different flavor. It still left him with a dime.

He moved along the street, just touching his tongue to the precariously balanced heap now and then. He licked it only often enough to keep ahead of the ice-cream's melting, and his thoughts were pleasantly engrossed as he turned off the main street.

The side street was shadier and much quieter, and details of the town began to come back to him. A ten-year old had so much to think about that past details were hard to keep straight. They blended together into a vague picture and were mostly forgotten. Only seeing them again brought them to life.

His eyes suddenly widened in horror. This was the street Pudge Ferrell lived on, the street he always avoided. He was fearfully turning his head when a hard hand jarred into his back. It snapped his head back, and he bit his tongue. The cone flew out of his hand and landed in the dirt beside the walk, and he felt the tears come into his eyes as he stared at its ruin. Unwillingly, he turned around, knowing who it was before he looked.

Pudge Ferrell threw back his head and laughed. It was an ugly sound; it put a weakness in Jimmy's knees. Pudge was three years older and twenty pounds heavier than Jimmy. His lank hair almost obscured his dull eyes, and his lower lip hung down like a piece of cut meat.

Jimmy had first seen him five years ago, when he had started to school. The memory of that awful year was sharp and clear in his mind. He hadn't known a day of it free from fear, for Pudge was always lurking around the next corner. Jimmy hadn't been sorry to leave this town. Pudge Ferrell outweighed all reasons for staying.

His smile didn't come out right because of his shaking lips. "Hello—Pudge," he said quaveringly.

"Hah," Pudge jeered. "Ole cry-baby is back."

Jimmy saw the intent in his eyes and turned to run. He wasn't quick enough. Pudge threw out a foot and tripped him, and Jimmy howled against the burn on his elbow as he rolled across the walk. Then he couldn't howl. Pudge was on his back, grinding his face into the dirt.

He didn't struggle against Pudge's weight. It had never been any use, and it wouldn't be any use now. He lay quiet, his mouth and nose filled with dirt, the sobs racking his body. That was the quickest way to make Pudge stop—not resist him.

Pudge finally got off of him, and Jimmy climbed up on shaking legs. He dug his knuckles into his eyes, the tears channeling through the dirt on his face. He didn't see the dime laying on the walk until Pudge hollered and sprang for it.

"That's mine!" Jimmy yelled. "That's—"

He backed away. The glitter was coming into Pudge's eyes again. He turned and ran, and Pudge howled threats behind him.

His sobs were ceasing by the time he reached the next block. That darned old Pudge. Darn him, darn him! Some day he would come back and show Pudge a few things. Some day— He couldn't even yell the lie big enough to make himself believe it. He was afraid of Pudge, and he always would be.

He scoured his palms across his cheeks, brushing away as much dirt as he could. He would tell Rick he had been just playing.

JIMMY cut across a little park, and saw Rick and Aunt Lynn sitting on a bench. Their backs were turned to him, but he would never forget the red-gold of her hair, or the way she carried her head. She was Jimmy's mother's sister, eight or nine years younger. Jimmy didn't know exactly. She hadn't wanted Rick to take Jimmy away. He could re-

member she had been mad and sad at the same time.

He started to call to them, then held it. They had been arguing. He could tell by the stiff, angry lines of their shoulders.

Then he heard Lynn say in a low voice, "You started running when Helen died, Rick. Selling the place is part of that running."

Rick didn't look at her. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know," she flashed. "You've been running, and you've dragged Jimmy along with you. What are you going to do with the money you get? Drink it up like you have everything else?"

He said hoarsely, "That's enough, Lynn."

"You made a big splash on the rodeo circuits until you got hurt. Then you completely lost your nerve. It would be too much hard work to put the place back into shape. It's easier to drift around and feel sorry for yourself than to face realities. It doesn't matter what happens to you, but you should be thinking about Jimmy."

Rick's voice sounded like glass scraping across slate. "You always were nosy. You used to hang around the house watching Helen and me. Wherever I turned, you were under foot."

Jimmy could see Lynn's profile, and she looked as though Rick had slapped her. These were the only two people in the world Jimmy really cared about, and he didn't want them to go on fighting like this.

He tried to make his voice cheerful as he called to them. They jumped as though they had been stung, they tried to make their faces normal, and it wasn't a good job at all.

Rick's eyes burned as he looked at Jimmy. He said coldly, "You're a mess."

Tears came into Jimmy's eyes, and he couldn't stop them. It wasn't because of Pudge, it was because of them fighting. But he had to blame the tears on something. He said, "That old Pudge—"

Rick said disgustedly, "You got whipped. Who's Pudge?"

Lynn's arms went around Jimmy. "Pudge Ferrell, wasn't it, Jimmy?"

Rick remembered then. He swore and didn't apologize. "I thought you'd outgrown running from that kid, Jimmy."

Lynn's eyes snapped. "He hasn't had much of an example."

Rick's eyes were like ice. "Here comes Hawthorne. Maybe he's more to your taste."

Jimmy looked, and Cleve Hawthorne was coming across the grass toward them. His face was ugly, as though he didn't like seeing them all together.

Lynn threw furious words after Rick as he started away. "I never heard of him running from anything."

Rick didn't answer as he dragged Jimmy with him. He walked faster than he had ever walked before. After a few blocks, he growled, "We'll wind up our business and get out of here."

They rented a car and drove out to the old place. It was in a sad state of disrepair. The fences were down or sagging, and the windmill, one of its blades missing, creaked dismally. The barn roof was almost gone, and the house looked tired and ready to sink into the ground. It didn't have any windows left, and it looked like a blind thing, helplessly begging someone for assistance.

Jimmy felt the lump come into his throat as he stood on the porch. He had had some happy times here. He remembered the pony Rick had bought him. He hadn't thought of it until he remembered where it used to stand in the corral. Rick looked as though he remembered things, too. His face was frozen, his eyes far, far away.

Jimmy felt the hot, stinging tears dam up behind his eyelids. Things hadn't been any good since Mother had died.

Rick muttered, "Where's that damned Sanderson? He said he'd meet me out here."

Sanderson finally came, a fat man with sharp eyes. He knocked everything about the place. Rick asked fifteen thousand, and Sanderson kept beating him

down. "All right," Rick said suddenly in weary tones. "Ten. Give me a check. You know you got a bargain."

Sanderson chuckled as he made out the check. He knew it all right.

THEY DROVE back to town, and Jimmy hoped Rick wouldn't leave him alone another night. But Rick said, "You go see Aunt Lynn. We won't be here in the morning."

Jimmy said, "Dad—" Rick put hard eyes on him, and Jimmy weakly said, "Nothing."

He only wanted to be with Rick tonight. He wished Rick could understand that. He followed at a safe distance and saw Rick go into the Golden Horn. He sat out on the curb, not daring to follow him inside. He knew what was going to happen. In the morning, Rick would be sick and miserable, and he would suddenly get in a hurry as though he were trying to run away from something.

He heard laughter come through the open door, and he listened for Rick's voice. Then he saw Cleve Hawthorne walk into the place, and somehow it scared him.

The laughter died away fast as though a great hand had choked it off, and Jimmy dared stick his head through the door. No one paid him any attention, and he stepped inside and flattened himself against a wall.

Cleve Hawthorne faced Rick, his face a hot red. He said loudly, "Taylor, I'm warning you to stay away from Lynn. You get her all upset and—"

Rick put indifferent eyes on him, then turned back to the bar.

"You're a bum!" Hawthorne shouted. "You used to call yourself a rider. Ride against me."

Rick flicked him with narrowed eyes in a face suddenly gone white. He said in a barely audible voice, "When I was riding, you couldn't carry a good man's saddle."

Hawthorne surged forward, and a man stepped in front of him. "None of that," the man said sharply. "We'll have none of that here."

"I'll ride against you tomorrow!" Hawthorne shouted. "For any amount you say. Duck out of that, Yellow."

Rick's face was marble-hard. Jimmy's heart pounded fearsomely, and he thought Rick was going to walk out without saying anything. "Don't, Dad," he prayed. "Don't let them keep looking at you that way."

Rick caught the way they were looking at him, for Jimmy saw the tiny twitch at the base of Rick's jaw.

Rick said in a metallic voice, "For ten thousand dollars, Hawthorne. Will you ride against that?"

He pulled Sanderson's check from his pocket and shoved it toward Hawthorne's hand. Hawthorne's face went board-stiff and his voice came out shrill and unnatural.

"I'll have to raise it," he croaked. "I'll see you in the morning, Taylor."

Rick's face was still ice-cold as he turned back to the bar, but Jimmy knew him too well to miss the slight shaking of his hand as he downed two stiff drinks in a row.

Jimmy plunged out of the place, his face working. He didn't understand all he had seen and heard, and he had to talk to someone about it. He ran all the way to Aunt Lynn's house, and her face grew whiter and whiter as he told her what had happened.

He said, "What's he going to do?"

She walked the floor, wringing her hands. "Nothing, he hopes. He hopes he's backed Hawthorne down, that Hawthorne can't raise that much money. But if Hawthorne does, Rick's lost. He won't ride with that bad knee. He's afraid to. It's all part of him being lost since Helen died, and he doesn't know what to do about it."

Rick said wonderingly, "Do you love him, too, Aunt Lynn?"

Her face wrinkled up as though she were going to cry, and she whispered, "I guess I always have, Jimmy. Helen knew it, you know it. Everyone does but him." She shook her head in weary resigna-

tion. "There's nothing I can do," she said bleakly. "Exactly nothing."

Jimmy went forlornly back to the hotel room, not expecting to find Rick there. Rick was sitting on the bed, staring into space. He asked dully, "Where you been, kid?"

"Aunt Lynn's." He didn't elaborate, and it wasn't hard to see Rick wasn't interested. Jimmy could smell liquor on Rick's breath, but he wasn't bad, wasn't like he had been some nights.

Jimmy asked in a small voice, "You can beat him, can't you?"

Some kind of emotion twisted Rick's face, and he asked harshly, "How'd you know?"

JIMMY told him about slipping into the Golden Horn. He thought for a moment that Rick was sore, then Rick reached out and pulled him close.

"Jimmy, that was a fool stunt. I'd had a few drinks too many. Hawthorne was sneering at me, and all the rest were waiting to see me crawl again. All I could think of was the check in my pocket. All I wanted was to see a little respect on their faces. No, I can't beat him. I can't even ride against him. I'm afraid to. All I can hope is that he won't be able to raise the money."

The words came out with a little sigh, as mournful as the sloughing of the wind.

"Didn't you ever wonder why I didn't ride any more, why we bummed around the country, taking any kind of a job? Fear," Rick said harshly, and his tone was a whip against himself. "They say a bronc peeler either gets sense stamped into him or completely knocked out. I got it stamped into me. I lay in the hospital thinking about the smashed knee. Doc kept coming in and saying I'd better treat it right next time, or I wouldn't have any knee left. Do you know what being a cripple means, Jimmy? Do you know how a thought like that knots a man's stomach?"

He peered closely into Jimmy's face and sighed. "Maybe you do in a small way. You've had that kind of fear about Pudge until all you can do is to run. Sometimes we can't do anything about whipping that kind of fear. Pray for us, Jimmy. Pray Hawthorne can't find the money."

Jimmy lay in the dark thinking about what Rick had said. He understood it. Just thinking about Pudge made Jimmy's stomach twist.

Rick was still sleeping when Jimmy got up in the morning. Rick's face looked tired and worn, and Jimmy stood in the doorway a long moment, watching him. Then he turned and hurried down the hallway.

He went to Aunt Lynn's house, and she said wearily, "Cleve's posted the money to meet Rick's challenge. The whole town's talking about it this morning."

Jimmy said weakly, "Oh." Somehow he had known it would happen, and all the way here he had been thinking about what he would do, if it did. He said in a small voice, "Will you have Rick on the corner of Clausby and First Streets at ten o'clock? Please."

He shook his head at her why. "I can't tell you."

The pleading in his face won a reluctant nod from her. She said angrily, "You're making me break a promise to myself, Jimmy."

He asked a last request, "Can I have fifteen cents."

She searched his face and said in exasperation, "If you just leave me standing there with Rick—"

He shook his head, and she put the coins in his hand.

He bought the ice-cream cone at a quarter to ten. He waited until he saw Rick and Lynn coming, far down the street. He walked hurriedly, thinking Pudge had to be around. He just had to be. He carried the cone in a rigid hand, and his eyes were like glass marbles. His stomach was stiff with fear, his feet didn't want to move, but he forced them along.

Rick and Lynn were at the corner

now, and Rick's face was puzzled as he saw Jimmy.

Jimmy was in front of Pudge's house, and he waited for the familiar rush of heavy feet. He wasn't disappointed. He heard Pudge say with wicked satisfaction, "So you're dumb enough to come back here again."

Jimmy heart felt as though it would hammer its way out of his chest as he faced Pudge. He saw the heavy, pendulous lip, the dull, staring eyes, and he thought the fear was going to paralyze him.

Pudge opened his mouth to say something, and Jimmy's hand moved without conscious volition. He jammed the cone into Pudge's opened mouth, and Pudge's squawk faded into a choked gurgle. He swiped at the mess, further smearing his face, and Jimmy hit him. He hit him tentatively and fearfully, and it wasn't much of a blow. It only stung Pudge to enraged action. He bounced a fist off Jimmy's nose, and tears and blood flowed together.

Jimmy fell back, and all his resolve faded. Pudge had never drawn blood before, he had never had to use that much force. Jimmy wiped a hand across his nose and sobbed. He looked at the blood on the hand. That was his blood. The tears came faster, but now they were mad tears. The fear left his stomach, he forgot about Rick and Lynn, he forgot everything but this big hulk before him.

PUDGE moved slowly forward, a confident grin on his face. He expected Jimmy to turn and run. Instead, Jimmy yelled and ran at him. He ran with his head lowered, and the unexpectedness of it swept Pudge's arms aside. Jimmy's head butted him in the stomch, and the breath went out of Pudge in an explosive whoosh. He was knocked down, and Jimmy ran over him. He had on sneakers, and he wished he was wearing boots with long spurs.

Pudge squalled in terror and outrage and struggled to get to his feet. Jimmy dived on top of him, his arms flailing like windmill blades in a high wind. He yelled fiercely as he swung, and there was blood on Pudge's face now—Pudge's blood.

The outrage was gone from Pudge's voice, and only terror was left. Jimmy's arms still pumped away. He had so much to make up for, and he knew no fatigue. Pudge was crying hard and begging in a blubbery voice. A hand seized Jimmy's shoulder and pulled him off.

"Hey," Rick said softly in his hear. "Don't you think that's enough, Wildcat?"

Jimmy yelled and struggled to get back to his work. Pudge got to his feet and backed away, digging knuckles into tear-filled eyes.

"I'm going to tell on you!" he howled. "I'm going to tell!"

Jimmy plunged at him until the length of Rick's arm jerked him up short. Pudge broke and ran. Jimmy followed him with scornful eyes. The big baby, the big cry-baby.

Rick's face was grave as he stared into Jimmy's eyes. "What brought that on?"

Jimmy said breathlessly, "It's not so hard, Dad. You can whip things, if you just forget everything and jump in."

Rick looked at Lynn, a queer expression on his face.

She said softly, "There it is, Rick."

He drew in a deep breath, and his voice was flat as he said, "I guess he handed it to me. . . ."

Jimmy sat beside Rick at the foot of the chutes. The stands were packed, and a hum of expectancy filled the air. Lightner, the promoter, had advertised this grudge contest well in the short time he had had. It was an extra tidbit for a thrill-hungry crowd, and their voices were rolling it over, tasting it to the fullest extent.

The loud-speakers blared, "This is a special contest between Cleve Hawthorne—" The raucous applause drowned out the announcer's voice for an instant. Hawthorne was the leading bronc

rider this year, and no matter what a man's disposition is, a crowd always loves a champ. "—and Rick Taylor, champion of three years ago." The applause was more scattered, more perfunctory, the polite applause an ex-champion always draws. "It is for a side bet of twenty thousand dollars and the winner take all." The announcer paused dramatically. "To make it an even contest, Steve Lightner has chosen one horse for both men to ride. The horse—" a long pause—"Death Warmed Over."

For a moment there was no sound, then the noise came in great volume. The name didn't mean much to Jimmy, but it did to the crowd. Death Warmed Over was a lengendary name, the complete and final bronco. He had never been ridden, and in the last two years, promoters had used him rarely. The performers didn't want him, for who wants to ride when the result is already certain? And maimed men and a few men killed chokes off even the challenges of brash young men.

The noise died down, and Jimmy looked at his father. Rick had on a new shirt and jeans, and his boots were polished. He didn't have the flash and dazzle of a Cleve Hawthorne, but he looked good.

Jimmy said, "Are you scared, Dad?" It wasn't idle curiosity. It was man-to-man talk.

Rick answered in the same vein. "Yes," he said soberly. "I'm all hollow inside."

Jimmy said, "I felt like that this morning. It doesn't feel so good, does it?"

Rick grinned. "I've had better feelings."

Before he could say anything else, Lynn was in front of him. She was breathing hard, and her eyes flashed through tear mist. "Did you hear the name of the horse?" She looked at his face and said, "You knew this morning."

He nodded, his face wooden.

"But that's the horse that hurt you!"

He said, "Ssshhh. You're disturbing the performers."

"Rick, you can't! You—"

HE SEIZED her arm. Jimmy could see the fingers biting deep, but no wince crossed her face.

Rick said gravely, "I kinda got myself into this. I'll have to get out the same way." He stared at her a long moment, and it looked as though there was a sudden catch in his breathing. He said, "Lynn," and his was the face of a man who has just seen something for the first time.

She pulled away, color flooding her face. "Rick. Please be careful."

He put a finger under the brim of his hat, poking it to a jaunty angle. "You think I'd take chances on that thing? Lynn, I've got something to say when it's over."

They drew to determine who would ride first, and Hawthorne got it. His face was dark with a worried sullenness. He hadn't planned on this horse, he hadn't planned on Lightner making a Roman Holiday out of this.

He climbed the fence and edged down into the chute. Death squatted and tensed under the weight, and that was all. He would waste no unnecessary effort here in this confined space. Rick watched with sober eyes. Three times he had tried to ride that thing, and three times he had been piled. The last time should have ended all other efforts. The horse had a diabolical cunning, he thought with almost human intelligence.

Death was a steel-dust stallion with a rough, shaggy coat, for no man had love enough for him to want to curry the animal. He had no beauty, unless wicked, wild strength is beauty. He was short in the barrel and long in the legs, and he had a wild fury that made a man think. There was no fun in the thought of an approaching ride on Death, there was only a tight-lipped grimness and the hope the pick-up men would be fast and alert.

Hawthorne took a long time adjusting

himself in the saddle. Even though he had never tried to ride this horse, he was wondering. For a reputation can be worse than the actual fact; it swells with each telling and retelling until an aura of invincibility cloaks the talked-of object.

"Turn him loose," Hawthorne croaked.

The slatted gate swung open and Death Warmed Over stepped into the arena, stepped as though he disdained the first, wild plunge other broncos made. Hawthorne was tensed, his head lowered, his face a carved, wooden mask. He had guts. You couldn't take that from him. He raked his spurs forward, then back, and tufts of hair flew from the horse's flanks.

Death's squall was an icy, arresting sound. He sprang upward from the tanbark, trying to punch a hole in the blue sky above him. He came down on stiffened forelegs, snapping Hawthorne's head forward, then back, and before the jolt of that pitch was gone from Hawthorne's body, he sprang again. He had steel muscles under that rough hide, and cold, hard steel for a heart. He sunfished and whirled and pitched, and the area his hoofs struck in could have been covered with a blanket.

Hawthorne's spurs kept up that wicked scratching, and tufts of hair and drops of blood followed in their wake. His form was better than good; it was flawless. He flogged the horse with his hat, those spurs never missed a rake, and no daylight showed between him and the saddle.

Jimmy saw Rick's lips moving and thought he was counting the seconds. Four or five had passed anyway. Maybe more. Then Hawthorne came unsteady as the bronc struck on one foreleg. He wavered and desperately fought to regain that tiny bit of lost balance. The horse knew then, and the pick-up men knew, for they were already closing in. It took two more jumps to snap Hawthorne out of the saddle, to fling him to one side like a bundle of old clothes, carelessly discarded.

The pick-up men threw their horses between the enraged bronco and the sprawled man. For an instant, the crowd held its voice until they saw Hawthorne scramble to his feet and run limpingly for the safety of the fence.

Death fought those pick-up men all the way, trying to get at Hawthorne, and they skillfully hazed him away and turned him toward the chutes.

IT HAD been a good ride. Everyone knew it. Hawthorne had stuck for something around seven seconds, about as good as anyone had ever turned in on the horse. And now Death was back inside the chute, waiting for Rick.

Hawthorne eyed Rick sullenly as Rick looked down from the top rail. If it was Cleve Hawthorne's mind that he had softened up the horse, he didn't say it. For he would have been hooted out of the arena by the men who knew. Death wasn't softened up after a little, short ride like that. Hawthorne scrubbed at his soiled cheek before he turned away. There was fear in the man, and worry.

Rick waved to Jimmy, then to Lynn. He dropped down into the saddle, and the gates came open almost immediately. He had wasted no time, letting the weakening thoughts come in.

Death bunched his muscles, squatting low, and for an instant he looked almost short. Rick's spurs stung him into violent action. The other contest with Hawthorne had been only a preliminary, a conditioner.

His hoofs struck the ground like hammers against an anvil, sending their wicked force hurtling through Rick's body. Another jump was started before the last was completed, and it wasn't possible that a horse could move so wickedly fast. His back was a humped bow-string, straightening with evil force, and still the leech on his back clung to him.

He pawed and pitched, landing on all four hoofs, then one, slamming Rick forward against the hard tree of the saddle. Rick's spurs scraped and the hat

hand flogged doggedly at the bronc's head and neck. It wasn't seconds that were passing, it was hours, and each took a deadly time in the going. A trickle of blood started at Rick's nose, then widened until it covered most of his mouth and chin.

His mouth was open, gasping for breath, and there was a rigid immobility in his face that was ghastly to see. Death never tired, never lessened that savage pitching. Now he varied his fight, swapping ends with as great an abandon as he had used on his first jump.

The crowd was silent, watching with awed eyes, and their silence was tribute to both horse and rider.

Rick clung with his thighs and legs, breaking the fearful impact of the hoofs slamming into the ground, on the stirrups. His head snapped back and forward as though his neck were broken.

There was no end to this thing. Jimmy's face was screwed up with the watching of it, and inside he was yelling, "Stop it—stop it!" Lynn held his hand with a force that made him wince, and all during the struggle she had made no sound.

Then the buzzer sounded, harsh and brazen in the stillness. The pick-up men reined close, and one of them snatched Rick off the Death's back. The noise came then, great flowing currents of it, and Rick lifted his head, acknowledging it. Death was still kicking and twisting in a far corner of the arena. The crowd may have thought him beaten, Rick may have thought it, but not the horse.

The pick-up man dropped Rick before Jimmy and Lynn, and she rushed to him and dabbed at the blood on his face with her handkerchief. There were words dammed up behind her lips, but at the moment, they would not come.

The crowd was still cheering, not waiting for the judges' decision, for it wasn't necessary. One man had ridden through his allotted time, the other had been thrown.

Hawthorne came to them, his face set in sullen loss. He said those words then, he said them with a sneer that cost him the friendship of everyone within hearing: "I softened him up for you."

Rick stared after him, then looked at Lynn. He said softly, "He's sore because of you, isn't he? He thinks I took away his chance."

He saw the acknowledgement in her eyes and grinned. "There's something I have to do. I'll be right back." He passed behind the fence, following Hawthorne.

The fence bars obscured Jimmy's vision, so he couldn't see at all clearly what was happening. He caught a flash of blurred action, heard the splat of something that could have been knuckles against flesh and heard a grunt, then a curse. He heard those splats again, coming so fast he could not count them, then the muffled thud as though something heavy had fallen into the dust.

RICK came back, rubbing his knuckles, and there was new and fresh blood on his face. "I should've done it a long time ago," he grumbled.

He looked at Lynn and said, "I needed the two of you for that ride. It took me a long time to realize it." He took Lynn's hand and drew her nearer. "Do you remember what Helen said when she was sick? She said, 'Rick, Lynn will help you take care of Jimmy.' She knew, didn't she?"

The tears in Lynn's eyes sparkled like diamonds. Jimmy stared from one to the other of them. He didn't know what they were talking about.

"Yes," Lynn whispered. "She knew."

Rick said, "I can buy back the place from Sanderson. He'll charge me a premium, but we'll still have enough to build it up again." His arms were around both of them, pulling them close. "Don't you two ever leave me. I need you."

Jimmy looked at Aunt Lynn's face. It wasn't hard to see she never intended leaving, and he knew how he felt. He was so happy he felt like bawling. He gulped and swallowed hard. A man who has no fear doesn't bawl. • • •

She held a small brown leather bag

Saddle Bum's Bonanza

Thirty thousand dollars and a lovely girl—
all from a holdup he had nothing to do with

NICK COLE didn't expect company in the deserted miner's cabin where he had holed up for the night. There was a spring storm raging along the ridges, carrying a threat of flash floods with it, and nobody, Cole figured, would be loco enough to be out in such a blow.

He sat with his worn boots pressed against the rusty stove, sipping a mug of coffee, musing over his misspent past. Five years of drifting from outfit to outfit all the way from the Platte to the Red River

By PAUL CHADWICK

and west to the Sacramento. Nothing but the same old story wherever he went. Forty a month and keep. Days spent on ranges working for bosses who didn't give a damn and nights spent squandering his money in two-bit cow-towns. Nothing to show for any of it except corns on his backside, a taste for rot-gut liquor and an evil temper.

Yet always in the back of his mind had been the thought that he would somehow, some day, strike it rich. The Big Break would come. The lucky turn of the wheel. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that lures men on till they finally leave their bones in some unmarked grave or on the sands of some lonely desert.

Cole was just about ready to call it a day and measure his six-foot length on the narrow bunk when something slapped the window pane. It made him jump, for the noise was different from the rushing sweep of the storm. It sounded like the beating of a bird's wings.

He jerked his head around and stared intently. But the glass was too dusty and the dusk outside too deep for him to make out what it was. All he could see was something ghostly white there at the window.

He knocked his chair over as he made a grab for the big gun hanging in leather on the wall. But when he got outside, the thing, whatever it might be, was gone. It was in the air, sailing away over rocks and sagebrush, moving too fast for man or horse to follow. It still made Cole think of a big, awkward bird.

He stood there frowning, a lanky, tattered figure in his worn cowboots and patched Levis, his unshaven face making him look older than his twenty-four years. The thing disappeared over a hilltop finally, and Cole shrugged and started back for the door.

It was just then that a girl, running as if seven devils were chasing her, came around the corner of the cabin and slammed smack into him.

She took him so by surprise that the circling movement his arms made around her was pure reflex. She'd have knocked him down if he hadn't hung on. He stood there swaying, staring into her face.

A pair of brown eyes stared back at him from under a tumbled mass of wind-blown hair. She was pale, her cheeks and long eyelashes beaded by rain. She wore a full-skirted dress, tight across her breasts. It was damp, wrinkled and badly torn.

When Cole relaxed his grip on her, embarrassed at his own unthinking movement, she stepped back a little and he saw that she held a small brown leather bag in her hand.

He started to speak, but the wind knocked the words against his teeth. The girl turned toward the cabin and pointed and when Cole nodded she hurried through the narrow door as though anxious to get out of the wetness and hubbub of the storm.

Cole looked at her wonderingly, questions rising in his mind.

SHE WAS coatless, and although somewhat bedraggled, her dress looked as though she had just come from a party. It was flowered and ruffled, with a strip of lace along the bottom. He couldn't find any reason for her being here, none certainly for her being dressed like a ballroom belle out in the wilderness on such a night as this.

"Light an' make yourself at home, ma'am," he said with a twisted grin and a mystified shrug.

She ran a quick hand through her hair, smoothing the loose strands back into place, at the same time, holding tightly to her little brown satchel with the other. She seemed embarrassed and at a loss for words. Finally, looking straight into Cole's blue eyes, she found her voice.

"You're wondering who I am and where I come from, aren't you?"

"Sort of, ma'am," Cole said falteringly.

She stood very still, brown eyes grave. Her voice took on a frightened, breath-

ess quality as if she had a lot to say and not much time to say it.

"I'm Peg Barry. My father ran the bank at Silver Butte. I saw your light and came as fast as I could. I need—somebody to help me."

Cole reached automatically for his sack of Duke's, and began rolling himself a smoke. The name Barry meant nothing to him. Silver Butte was only a spot on a map somewhere, another measly cowtown. And he didn't notice that the girl had used the past tense in speaking of her father.

When he finished making his cigarette he picked up the fallen chair ad pushed it toward her. But she ignored it. She still clung tightly to the leather bag, as if its contents were somehow precious.

"Would you be willing to help me?" she asked asked huskily.

Cole's fingers grew preoccupied with a match. His face was masklike. He didn't quite see how a penniless saddle-bum like himself could help anybody, let alone a strange girl in a party dress who came running to him out of the night and who claimed to be a banker's daughter. Besides that, the only person he believed in helping was Nick Cole.

She seemed to sense his reluctance, for her words came tumbling out again.

"My being here isn't as mysterious as it seems," she said. "The Carson City stage was held up this afternoon. I was on it, riding back to Silver Butte with my dad. The hold-up was just this side of Broken Jaw Ridge and Dad was the first man to be shot."

She waited for Cole to say something, but he didn't. He held his match in still fingers, letting it burn. The look on her face was understandable now. Fascinatedly, he watched her pale lips as they moved again.

"I managed to get away without them seeing me—the hold-up men, I mean. I slipped around the back of the stage and found a hideout behind a boulder while Whit Jones, the shotgun guard, and Roark Ellis, the driver, were still fighting. Dad asked me to do it."

"He wasn't killed right off then, ma'am?" asked Cole.

"No." Her mouth worked and tears started in her eyes. "He asked me to try to get away—just before he died."

Cole blew his match out, broke it in two and threw the pieces at the stove.

"You're soaked." he said. "You're not wearin' the right kind of clothes for this weather."

"No?" She looked down at her dress, touched it with light, caressing fingers. "My birthday dress! Dad bought it for me in Carson City. I'm afraid it's ruined now—just like my poor birthday bonnet was." She raised her soft brown eyes to Cole's. "It doesn't matter, though, does it? There's something much more important."

"A bonnet, did you say?" asked Nick Cole sharply.

"Yes. A white one. It was pretty."

Nick's forehead wrinkled in thought. "That must have been what I saw flappin' against the window," he said.

"Possibly. I lost it just before I got here. The wind took it off my head. I lost my coat, too. I had to leave it behind after it got caught in some bushes. I was hurrying, you see."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere to get away. They're after me, I feel certain. They may be coming here now."

"Who, ma'am?"

"The hold-up men, of course." Her eyes went uneasily to the window. "There's something in this bag they want desparately to get."

"What?" Cole's eyes dropped to the leather bag again and he felt a sudden stir of excitement. But he tried to keep his voice calm.

"Thirty thousand dollars."

She said it softly, looking straight up into his face.

"I might as well tell you," she went on. "I'm alone and desperate and there's no one else to turn to. But it isn't my father's money or mine either. It belongs to a lot of people, some of them poor people

—depositors in the Silver Butte Bank. There's been a run on it and whispers of a panic. Father got a loan and was bringing it in quietly to strengthen the accounts."

HER eyes were dark and grave as she stared at Cole now. She reminded him somehow of a small, serious schoolgirl reciting a lesson.

"People think bankers are mean, I know," she continued. "But they aren't really—not all of them, at least. My father wasn't. He was always buying me things, pretty things. And even when he lay wounded and dying he worried over his precious bank and the people who had put their trust in him."

Cole felt the excitement inside him deepen. Thirty thousand dollars was a lot of money. He'd never even seen that much money, and when he thought of what it could buy, how easy his life would be if he had it, it was just as though he'd tipped up a bottle of red-eye and emptied it down his throat. No more riding from job to job over lonely ranges taking lip from cranky bosses. No more holing up like a gopher in abandoned shacks on the edge of nowhere. No more sweating and skimping. This was the Big Break he'd been waiting for—the Big Bonanza. He kept the excitement out of his voice and spoke flatly.

"There must have been a leak. How'd those gunslingers know enough to go after that partic'lar stage on that partic'lar run?"

" I don't know," she said. "Somebody from the place where my father borrowed the money probably tipped them off. But that doesn't matter now either. There isn't time to discuss it. I've got to get this money to the Silver Butte bank as soon as possible—by tomorrow morning anyway."

"How you fixin' to do that?" asked Cole.

"With your help," she said simply.

Her words were so trusting that it made him grin. She was only a kid really,

[*Turn page*]

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a rich man's daughter who'd been petted and protected from life's hard knocks. She couldn't guess what crafty, ugly, thoughts were shaping in his mind. She couldn't guess what thirty thousand dollars meant to a hard-bitten saddle-bum who had dreamed so long of a bonanza.

"I don't believe I can help you, ma'am." he said coldly.

"But you can. You've got horses, haven't you?"

"Only one. Just old Whitefoot."

"Will you lend him to me?"

"You reckon you could get to Silver Butte on a night like this if I did?" he asked.

"I—I think so."

"And you reckon you could outride those fellers if they came after you?"

"I don't know. But—"

He shook his head.

"You couldn't, ma'am. Better stay here an' hide the money."

She took a step toward him, her face tense.

"You don't understand! It's as though the wind had a warning in it. I can feel them coming. They know, they *must* know now, that I got away with the cash. They'll be searching everywhere. And this money must be in the bank tomorrow—before the doors open."

"Why, ma'am."

"Because word will get around then. After a few depositors have closed out their accounts and seen their cash the rest will feel safe. That's how it is with money. The way people feel about it is important."

"I wouldn't know," said Cole. "Never had any. Not much, that is."

"Won't you let me use your horse or else take me to Silver Butte right away?" she pleaded. "I'll be everlastingly grateful. So will the bank's depositors."

Cole ground his cigarette out on the floor.

Even with her wet, bedraggled clothing she was no great weight. Cole found that out as he lifted her into the saddle of his old bronc. The brown bag didn't weigh much of anything either. It was funny, he thought, how much thirty thousand dollars could buy, yet how light it could be.

The lightness of the girl and the money, he mused, would make it easy to do what he planned to do. He wondered why he had delayed at all. He guessed he just wouldn't have felt right if he had left the girl here where the hold-up men might find her and mistreat her, trying to learn where the cash had gone. He'd have to make sure she was safe somewhere and then—

His thoughts crept ahead. Nobody around here knew him or even knew he was in the vicinity. And Peg Barry had forgotten to ask him his name. It would be so easy there'd be nothing to it. It was the kind of thing he'd dreamed of, sitting around lonely campfires or night-riding the dark ranges. A fortune falling into his lap!

At the moment, though, there was a girl in his lap. She rode in front of him, her damp, dark hair blowing back into his face and her soft body pressed against him. She rode trustingly, thinking he was going to help her.

"A heck of a birthday!" he thought, and he pictured again her white bonnet, her birthday bonnet, flying off over the brush in the snarl of the wind, just like her father's life had sped away before a gunslick's bullet.

THEY rode on in silence for almost ten minutes while consciousness of the girl's close presence seeped its way into Cole's blood like a warming potion. He'd like to take her in his arms, he thought. He'd like to kiss her. She was the kind of girl he'd often dreamed of, soft and sweet and trusting—along with that other dream of the big bonanza.

Then suddenly he had something else to think of, something close and threatening.

The storm's first tumult had slacked up a little. But thunder boomed in the distance and lightning flickered off across the sky. In the shimmer of it, outlined against a background of rocks

and rain-wet sage. Nick Cole saw three horsemen coming.

They were fast-riding horsemen, dark figures, moving purposefully. One of them looked his way and then, clear in the next lightning flash, Cole saw them turn and head straight for him.

Peg Barry saw them, too, and he felt her tremble. Anger leaped inside him at the thought of those oncoming men. The thirty thousand in cash was rightfully his and now, with his hands almost upon it, these others were coming after it, too.

The ugly notion came of getting rid of the girl at once, freeing his horse from its double load and making a run for it. But her nearness, her trusting faith in him, made him reconsider. He would have to see to her safety first, before he took the money.

There were rocks and a rolling hilltop off to his right and Cole headed toward it, spurring Whitefoot. It became a race in the next twenty minutes, his still fairly fresh horse against those three determined riders behind.

Cole turned in the saddle and saw them getting closer, almost within shooting distance. But the rocks were close, too, now. He was in amongst them the next instant and Whitefoot was streaking it up the hillside. Cole spurred him on to the top and over it, and for a few brief seconds he and the girl and the cash were safe.

Yet it was only a respite. Cole drew rein, letting Whitefoot catch his labored breath, waiting for the next lightning flash so that he could decide which way he had better go.

Peg Barry spoke, her head turned slightly, her lips close to his and her dark hair brushing his face.

"What next?" she asked him.

"I'm going to hide you," he told her. "Then I'll try to fight it out."

"How can you—against three men?"

"It's been done," Cole muttered. "Maybe with luck—"

"But the money! How will I get it in to the bank?"

[*Turn page*]

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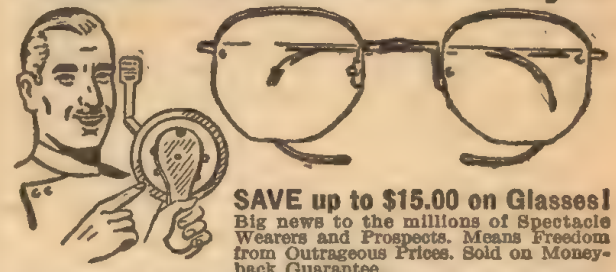

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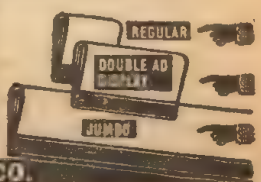

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"I don't know, ma'am. Whitefoot can't outrun those fellers with both of us ridin' on him and you wouldn't know how to handle him even if I did let you take him."

She was quiet a moment, then she voiced his own thoughts, but in a different way and with different implications.

"You'll have to drop me off," she said simply. "You'll have to carry the money and see if you can outrun those men alone. I'll hide and they'll follow you and then maybe you can shake them or fight them off."

It made what he planned to do so easy that he marveled.

"You want me to try, ma'am?" he said.

"Yes. Please. You'll do it—I feel certain. Take the money to Silver Butte and give it to Horace Stensland, the cashier at the bank. Tell him it's the loan my father got. You know how to reach Silver Butte, of course?"

"I reckon so, ma'am. It's north of here."

"Head north then and—good luck."

She pushed the brown bag at him and Nick Cole took it and felt his fingers tremble. It was almost too easy—like taking candy from a baby's mouth. He scowled then. What did he care for Peg Barry or for those depositors at the Silver Butte Bank? There was Nick Cole to think of. And far to the south, calling him with its siren voice, was the Border.

In the next flash of lightning he saw her eyes looking at him, wide and trusting. He helped her down out of the saddle and she stood for an instant hesitantly on the rain-swept ground, her party dress clinging to her. He waited till she had disappeared among the rocks, a small, slim figure among the gigantic boulders.

Then he purposely showed himself on the hilltop for a moment where the three riders would be sure to see him.

They did. Guns flamed in the night. Bullets whined around Cole as he spurred down the shoulder of the hill, lead-

ing the trio away from the rocks where the girl had hidden. He still couldn't take any chances with her young life even though she meant nothing to him. She would be cold and wet, lonely and frightened, but she would come through somehow. The sheriff's posse would search for her and find her after they'd found the raided stage. And the bitterness in her heart over the theft of the money would fade out in time. Down over the Border, on Easy Street for the rest of his life, Nick Cole would be able to think of her pleasantly, even drink a toast to her perhaps. The girl who had brought him his bonanza!

BUT now there were those three men behind him, their guns thundering, their bullets whistling close. He turned in the saddle and fired back, yet his lead might as well have been mere raindrops for all it halted them. The lure of easy money burned hot in their blood, too.

Cole's eyes swung desparately as the lightning flickered. There must be some way out. Fate wouldn't dump thirty thousand dollars in his lap just to snatch it away again.

He kept on spurring Whitefoot till the old horse, winded and weary, began to falter. Cole knew then that he couldn't outrun those bullets. All he could do was make a stand and fight.

He caught sight of a high rock and wheeled toward it, pulling Whitefoot back on his haunches when he reached it. There he dismounted, and slipping his belt through the handle of the brown bag to hold it, to keep it with him at all costs, he got down on hands and knees and crawled like a lizard to the outer edge of the rock. His six-gun was out but he held his fire till the drumming hoofbeats were close. Then luck favored him. Lightning flared and he timed his trigger action to it. His first shot brought one of the three dark riders to the ground.

The other two separated, swept around him, firing as they rode. A bullet came

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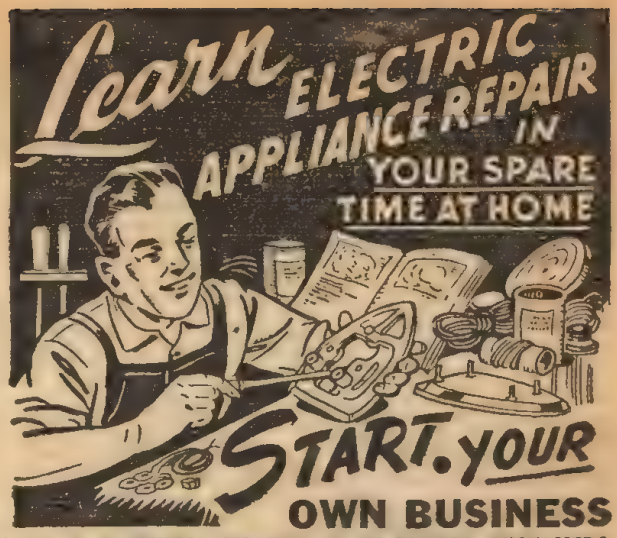

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so close to Cole that flying chips of rock burned his face. But he was still alive, and the money hanging to his belt gave him confidence. They'd get it, he determined, only over his dead body.

When they dismounted and began stalking him, closing relentlessly in from both right and left, Cole braced himself for the gun battle ahead. There was full knowledge of what he faced. Men who would hold up a stage in broad daylight, gunning down driver and shotgun guard, would stop at nothing.

Just in time he found a niche in the big rock and slid his body into it. It saved him from the withering cross-fire that came a second later. Bullets drummed and whined off the face of the stone, even plucking at his sleeve.

He held his cramped position till the fire lessened. Then cautiously he poked his gun out and blazed back. That was a mistake. One of the men shifted position and his next shot sent a burning stab of pain across Nick Cole's side.

Cole fought down the panic that possessed him, the impulse to lunge out into the open, but used an old scout trick instead. There was a dead bush rooted in the niche of rock. Cole broke it, placed his hat on top and lifted it up.

Instantly there was an answering stab of fire in the darkness and Cole swung his Colt toward it. He felt the hat jerk on top of the bush as he squeezed the trigger.

Thee was a harsh cry as his lead slammed home. In the far-off flicker of lightning that followed Cole saw the man reeling toward him through the brush. Their guns flamed together this time. Cole was the steadier. He saw his unknown enemy fling out his arms, then spin and fall.

Two dead men now, and one living man still after him! Thirty thousand dollars being paid for by blood and death!

The burning pain in Cole's side almost sickened him. Yet instinct warned him that he must not relax an instant. There was only one man of the trio left, yet

the ominous silence that had now descended told Cole that he still had his toughest adversary to face.

Cole saw a bush move once, silhouetted against the horizon glare where the storm was still muttering its way into the distance. But his probing bullet found nothing. It was almost as though, this time, he were fighting a ghost.

He played the game of waiting death, too, and it became a contest of patience, a question of whose nerve would break first. A sweat broke out on his face, though the night air was cold. His hands felt clammy and several times his gun wavered. He had so much to live for now that he had that thirty thousand dollars that his old recklessness in the face of death was gone. It was a handicap in a way, an asset, in another. He had the cash and the other man didn't. The feel of that little brown satchel against his body was a steadying influence, a reminder to be cautious.

He waited in the niche of rock and it was his enemy who finally resorted to desparate action.

Cole's first warning was a trickle of sand on his neck. He turned frightened eyes upward and there, loomed against the sky like a puma ready to spring, was the last of the hold-up trio.

IT WAS only Cole's instinctive, twisting reaction that saved him. He literally fell out of the rock niche as lead blasted down. He sprawed full length on the earth beside the boulder and the next instant the dark shape above had hurtled down upon him. A gun lifted to crunch his skull. Nick squirmed and fought back like a tiger. The gun butt landed on the earth instead of his head. He caught on arm and held onto it, and drove a fist upward into the man's face.

There was a grunt, a snarl. Hands met around Cole's throat, throttling the breath out of him. Lights flared and swirled in his brain. He drove his fists in short, futile jabs against the body of the man on top of him; then, feeling

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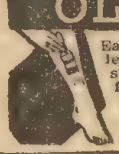

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his senses slipping, knowing that death hovered close, he crawled desperately, feebly, for the gun at his side.

How he got it he never quite knew. The holding, the turning, the pressing of the trigger was all automatic. And when there was the dull thud of the shot with muzzle pressed close, the sudden relaying of the body, the easing up of the throttling hands, it was all as though Cole were coming out of a dream.

He rolled the man off finally, got to his feet and stood there swaying. There was an ache in his bones, the burning pain in his side still, a feeling of utter weariness.

But the fight was over. Nick Cole had won. He had beaten his unknown enemies to the kill, and by the law of Nature, the gun law of the West, the victory was his and the spoils of victory also. He fumbled and felt for the little brown satchel at his side. It was still there. Away to the south the border of Mexico beckoned. Deserts, canyons, rivers unguarded where a thief could slip through. He'd get there just about dawn if he kept his pace in the hours left to him. Whitefoot had had a long rest, but he'd take along one of the bandits' mounts as a spare.

He chose the one that seemed fastest and, mounting Whitefoot, he headed south, away from Silver Butte and its bank and depositors. He thought of the girl back on the hillside; of her dark, wind-blown hair and of her trust in him. It was a thought that hurt and he had to force himself to think of other things.

He rode for a mile, two, till the sky cleared and the pale moon came out, and suddenly something caught his eye—a ghostly white something that fluttered on a catclaw bush ahead of him. He drew rein curiously, dismonuted and walked forward with a prickling sensation along his neck. He didn't believe in signs and portents, he told himself. He wouldn't truck with such things.

But it was a bonnet, *her* bonnet, impaled there on a thorn. It waved in his

face as, hours before, when the storm was at its height, it had waved against his window. In its mad, careening flight on the wings of the wind it had gone on south ahead of him.

It seemed to wave now like a frail banner, the banner of her courage, of the will that had brought her to his lonely shack. She had risked death, not for herself, but for her dead father, and for her father's depositors in that bank in Silver Butte that Cole had never seen.

He lifted the bonnet wonderingly, held it in his trembling fingers and felt the soft lace aronud the edge. Her face seemed to peep out from under it, her brown eyes looking at him, trusting him, the sweep of her dark, tossing hair.

Nick Cole swore and felt a surging revolt inside him as though conflicting forces were tearing at his vitals. He stood there trembling, holding the bonnet till the revolt gradually subsided and a slow warmth took its place; a warmth and a breath that seemed to touch his spirit, a living breath—her breath.

His shoulders straightened. He turned and walked back to Whitefoot and climbed into the saddle. With the bonnet folded inside his shirt close against his heart, with the brown satchel slapping his saddle, he turned his back on Mexico and its siren voice. He headed the other way—north toward Silver Butte.

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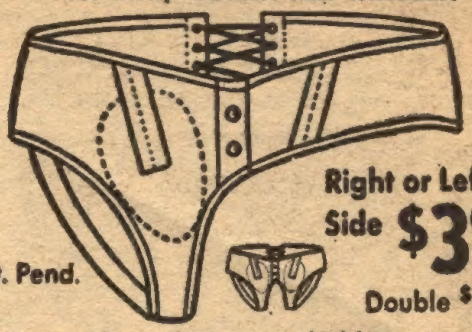

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

Burt had, just a dozen ex-cowpunchers pitting their inadequate strength against a veritable legion of lawbreakers.

It seems a trifle ridiculous, even now, knowing how well those twelve succeeded. And back there in the days when Arizona Territory had been brought to its knees by the Wild Bunch, it must have struck the armchair reformers as utterly fantastic. What, they demanded, could Mossman do with 12 riders? Why even bother to try, with that few men?

Other critics complained that Mossman's Rangers were too quick on the trigger, that they were as bloodthirsty as the outlaws. Their finer sensibilities were outraged at the thought of fighting fire with fire, of operating on the brutal philosophy of an eye for an eye. These sensitive souls wanted protection—they howled for adequate control of rustlers, stage robbers and two-gun killers—yet they complained at the methods used to get the job done. And even though Governor Murphy had promised Burt Mossman a free hand, there was some political pressure brought to bear against the Ranger captain.

Murphy was a Republican and it had been called to his attention by zealous politicos that Captain Mossman was hiring Democrats as Rangers.

When Murphy asked Mossman about it, the captain retorted, "If you think I can go into those hills and catch train robbers with a bunch of Sunday school teachers you are very much mistaken!"

Then, with humor twinkling in his eyes, Burt added, "I told Governor Murphy he shouldn't complain. I said, as it is now, every time one of my men gets killed he's a Democrat, and there are too many Democrats in the Territory already. So all I have to do is keep appointing them and there soon won't be any Democrats left to worry the Republicans."

Just What Was Needed

Actually Mossman didn't care a damn about the politics of his Rangers. It was their shooting ability he was concerned with, and their skill at tracking down fugitives. When he sent a man out to "take" a rustler or bank robber or horse-thief he wanted that man to get the job done.

Granted that some of his crew weren't concerned with the niceties of giving an outlaw an even break, or with what happened to the body afterward, they weren't paid for being polite. It was dog-eat-dog and the devil took the hindmost.

Burt's men played the Wild Bunch at their own game. They wore the same clothes, used

the same equipment, talked the same language. And to increase the resemblance, they wore no badges. If a Ranger, biding his time in an outlaw camp until the sign was right, happened to be searched by suspicious noose-dodgers, they found nothing on his person to indicate that he was a lawman.

"We had no fancy uniforms nor unusual equipment," Burt explained. "Just what was needed to do the job."

And mostly they got it done. Little wonder then, that Captain Mossman chafed so impatiently at the delay in corraling Chacon, an outlaw wanted for various crimes including murder. Referred to in the newspapers as the "Human Tiger," Chacon had once broken jail shortly before he was scheduled to be hanged.

Every Ranger on the force had an itch to capture him, but the Tiger was evasive as a shadow. He would stage a daring raid, shooting men as if they were clay targets, and hightail across the line into Mexico. Time after time the Rangers missed capturing him by aggravating margins, and each failure sealed the doom of future victims of the Tiger. Finally Mossman took on the job.

Here is how the Bisbee *Daily Miner* of September 4, 1902, described the event:

"Chacon, the noted Mexican outlaw and cut-throat, was captured at daylight this morning by Captain Burton C. Mossman. The captain rode quietly out of Bisbee last Tuesday evening without any fuss and feathers, and as quietly returned this afternoon with a new feat to add to the service he has so gallantly commanded.

"For three days and nights, without sleep, he rode, trailed and watched, waiting for his man to step on U. S. soil, and as quietly and relentlessly he affected the arrest."

But the newspaper article doesn't mention the fact that Mossman made that arrest on Mexican soil—that he crossed the Border, invaded Chacon's camp and managed to get the drop on him. Burt's only authority was the gun in his hand. He had no right in Mexico, but it wasn't the first time necessity forced the Rangers to a broad interpretation of the laws. What he did actually amounted to an armed invasion of a foreign land, but this was kept secret at the time.

"Might've caused international complications if the paper had published it," Burt explained smilingly. "I had no jurisdiction over there. None at all. Nor any papers of extradition. But I brought him across, regardless. It was the only way he could have been taken into custody at that time."

Which is probably the reason that Earl R. Forrest, the brilliant historian, wrote: "Mossman carried the law into the mesquite with a fearlessness seldom equaled in Western history." No wonder Burt's eyes twinkle when he gets to remembering the old days . . .

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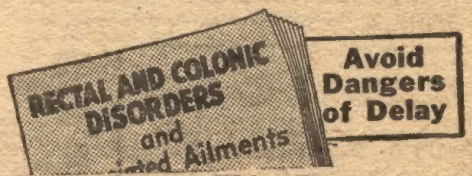

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